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Rhetorical Ripples: The Church of the SubGenius, Kenneth Burke & Comic, Symbolic Tinkering

Lee A. Carleton

Virginia Commonwealth University, carletonla@mymail.vcu.edu

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Rhetorical Ripples:
The Church of the SubGenius, Kenneth Burke & Comic, Symbolic Tinkering

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Media, Art and Text Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Lee Allen Carleton
B.S. Bible, Lancaster Bible College, 1984
M.A. English Composition, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1996

Director: Dr. Nicholas Sharp
Assistant Professor English Department

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife Clary, my son Holden (6) and my daughter Huxley (3) who have inspired my ongoing efforts and whose natural joy, good humor and insight lit my wandering path. On the eve of my 53rd birthday, I can honestly say that I am a very fortunate and happy man.

Acknowledgements

Without a doubt, these few words can hardly express the gratitude I feel for my committee and their longsuffering patience with me as I finally found my focus. Though we consulted rarely, when we did it was always fruitful. I sent occasional audio updates that I hope you found engaging and informative. A special thanks goes out to Dr. Sharp whose guidance, encouragement and insight kept me going when it got deep. And finally, to my mentor and friend Walter Coppedge, I offer particular gratitude as one of many students whose creative intellect he has inspired with his hospitable teaching.

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“Abstract”

RHETORICAL RIPPLES: THE CHURCH OF THE SUBGENIUS, KENNETH BURKE & COMIC, SYMBOLIC TINKERING

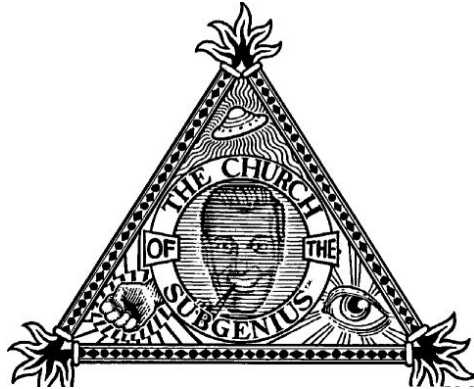
Lee Allen Carleton, Ph.D.

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Media, Art and Text

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Dr. Nicholas Sharp, English

Humor has long been an effective way to engage difficult sociopolitical topics in a way that avoids polemical confrontation and provides opportunity for pleasure, catharsis and self-knowledge. In the context of today’s polarized politics and protest, creative satirical performance that deploys “symbolic tinkering” can provide a “comic frame of reference” that, according to Kenneth Burke, more effectively conveys its message while providing reflexive insight. The satirical Church of the SubGenius naturally practices this rhetorical frame in their multimedia creations. Using the lens of Burke’s *Attitudes Toward History*, this essay is an analysis of SubGenius rhetoric with a focus on their *Hour of Slack* live radio program and the book *Revelation X* to provide an informative example of Burke’s comic frame applied, and clarify the nature of its utility by exploring the rhetorical impact of the Church of the SubGenius and the relevance of its “comic corrective.” Politically cynical, SubGenii are nevertheless keen cultural critics whose sophisticated use of a complex comic rhetoric warrants more serious attention.



“You’ll Pay to Know What You Really Think!”

J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, *The Book of the SubGenius*

“OUR CREED: ‘Orthodoxy Is The Only Heresy’”

SubGenius Pamphlet #1

“The most serious truths can be coached into jokes.”

Rueckert, *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*



Chapter 2

Definition, Origins & Selected History of the Church of the SubGenius

Burke’s Initial Connection

Written in 1937, Kenneth Burke’s observation above about the utility of the comic frame to promote "maximum consciousness" is even more relevant and necessary in 2014 as our world is rapidly connecting and transforming via new protean communication technologies, most notably the Web, Smartphones and Social Media. While these astonishing new tools have

sparked revolutions and helped to hold power accountable, we have yet to transcend our foibles: the world remains at the mercy of unaccountable power, deadly conflict, environmental degradation and increasing socioeconomic disparity. Burke addresses these issues directly in his writing and they are also central targets of SubGenius satire which, in spite of its non-activist nature has nevertheless had a subtle but surprising impact on popular culture and civic discourse.



“Philo Drummond” as Overman and Doug Smith before “Ivan Stang”

The Church of the SubGenius is worth our attention for its evolving protean narrative, its unschooled use of Burke’s sophisticated rhetoric, its keenly targeted cultural critiques, and perhaps most importantly for its insistent valorization of sufficient leisure for unfettered creativity, and its modeling of creative improvisation that is motivated more by pleasure than profit or politics. I hope the powerful utility of the comic frame and the crucial necessity of free creative exercise will become clear in the following pages. Wrestling power to account with humor, and personal development of strong creative skills may be two of the most valuable and hopeful survival tools we can deploy in our rapidly changing 21st Century.

Definition

The short definition of the Church of the SubGenius is: an artistic satire group started in Dallas, Texas in 1978 by Douglass St. Clair Smith III, a.k.a. the “Rev. Ivan Stang” and his friend Steve Wilcox a.k.a. “Philo Drummond” whom Stang credits with the original idea. Since then Rev. Stang, has been the central public figure in the church. It can be challenging to define or explain precisely what the CoSG is, since the trickster spirit is central to their practice so that their “theology” and definitions are always changing, always open to revision. However we can begin with *The Book of the SubGenius* that gives us its “official” definition in an excellent example of their neologistic logorrhea:

The Church of the SubGenius is an order of Scoffers and Blasphemers, dedicated to Total Slack, delving into Mockery Science, Sadofuturistics, Megaphysics, Scatalography, Schizophrenia-trics, Morealism, Sarcastrophy, Cynisacreligion, Apocolyption-omy, ESpectorationalism, HypnoPediatrics, Subliminalism, Satyriology, DistoUtopianity, Sardonicology, Fasciestiouism, Ridiculophagy, and Miscellastheistic Theology.

When asked to define the CoSG during an email interview suggesting words like “multimedia event”, “happening” or “performance” Rev. Stang replies:

All those things plus a take-off, a satire, a social club, a real cult, a rip-off, the one true religion etc. etc. -- why not all those things? We don't seem to be ABLE to limit it to a category, which may be one reason it remains fairly obscure...it's also a burlesque show, an underground comic book, and a keg party. (Stang email)

Though Stang and other churchmembers make elaborate gestures of pretense as part of their practice of mocking pretention, there is little actual pretense in Rev. Stang and the Church of the SubGenius.

A working definition of the Church of the SubGenius for our purposes is that it is *a deliberately mutating, subtly viral, loosely coordinated, participatory multimedia performance satire of human hubris, hierarchy, titles, consumerism, credulity, cults and cultural homogenization*. During its 30-year history the Church of the SubGenius has expressed itself in nearly every medium imaginable, beginning with claymation animation and hand-spliced movies and audio Rev. Stang and the SubGenii have surfed the rapidly shifting media tides well and have a complex and sophisticated web presence that hosts a labyrinth of visual and sonic treats created by fellow SubGenii.

In addition to its weekly *Hour of Slack* radio show, the creative productions of the CoSG include several books, a few pamphlets, t-shirts, hats, stickers and mugs, CDs of media barrage, songs about "Bob" and church teachings and DVDs with a variety of surreal movie and animation features – not to mention regular performance devivals throughout the U.S. and overseas. The spontaneous creative flow inspired by "Bob" and SubGenius mythology is such that in the SubGenius Timeline Ivan Stang notes with satirical wit:

I, Stang, have spent the last 22 years attempting to properly exploit the incredible flood of inspired art, audio, animation, and above all WORDS that have spewed from the SubGenius High Unpredictables. And I have utterly failed. It would take an army of monks. But among all these artists, writers, show-offs and *signifying monkeys*, there is not even ONE monk.

(Timeline, italics mine)

Stang's use of the phrase "signifying monkeys" is likely a loose reference to the Yoruba Trickster figure rather than any formal literary theory. The phrase stands out here in its synchrony with Kenneth Burke's phrase man as the "symbol-using animal," a concept we will

explore in more detail later. A cursory consideration of human symbolic expression, ranging from the Caves of Lascaux to the symbolic maelstrom of the Web, suggests we are indeed a simian species spellbound by the symbols of our own making.

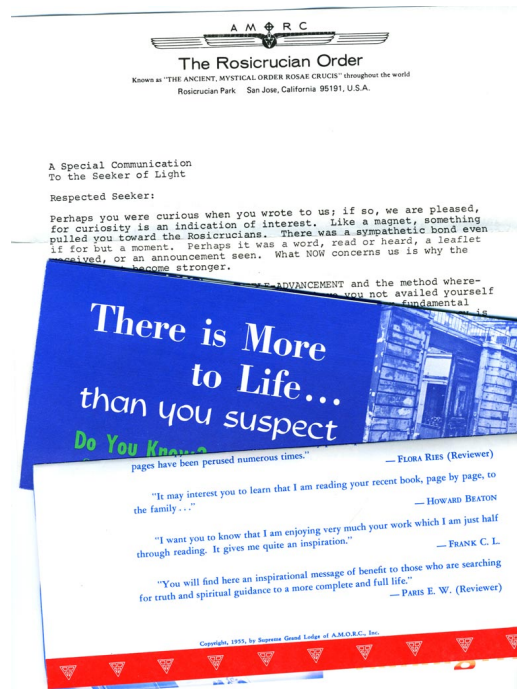
Origins

When did the Church of the SubGenius begin? There are several possible answers. We can date it to its first official publication in January 1980, a 6-page 8.5"x11" mail-fold pamphlet entitled "The World Ends Tomorrow and You May Die!" Composed by Stang and his creative partner Philo Drummond, the pamphlet is densely packed with tiny type and collages of strange images and 1950s style clip-art and exaggerated tone, interspersed with amusing or alarming slogans in larger fonts of varying style. The Church of the SubGenius could *save your sanity!*

- You'd PAY to know what you REALLY think.
- A SPAZZ-CHURCH OF MACHO IRONY!!!
- Become PHYSICALLY ATTRACTIVE – overnight!
- The most 'NO WAY' new wage religion of them all!!
- Inspired Madman or Complete Jackass?

Via image and text, the pamphlet simultaneously satirizes end-times cults, self-help scams, conspiracies, religion, proselytizing, cultural homogenization and the alien threat, all while reflexively critiquing itself as a "baroquely cheesy pamphlet" (Pamphlet #1). The Church of the SubGenius, their archives offers evidence of a variety of influences that inspired Pamphlet #1 such as this heavily re-inscribed John Birch Society Pamphlet.

6



Another possible beginning for the Church of the SubGenius might be the discovery of the trusty, cheerful, pipe-clenching face of “J. R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs” in a collection of telephone book clip-art and the invention of the word “SubGenius” by Philo in July 1978 (Timeline). Perhaps not incidentally, Stang’s timeline also notes that the mass suicide of the Jonestown cult occurred that November. Whatever the specific year, Rev. Stang and his amorphous congregation have continued the DaDa tradition and prefigured today’s digital mash-up format beginning with hand-spliced celluloid film and magnetic tape, hand-drawn collages and claymation, ultimately graduating to sophisticated use of digital tools for a galaxy of new creations and many repurposings of the old.



**1980 Doug Smith (Stang) looking at film with his son Xandy Smith
now a successful commercial, music and narrative video director at www.xsfilm.com
(Archive)**

These repurposings have taken an array of media forms from claymation, to still images, stage design, costume design, writing and most especially audio collage. In SubGenius radio and literature, the word “DaDa” is repeated and though not specifically named, William Burroughs’ applied his cut-up compositional approach to audio recording with an emphasis on juxtaposing incongruities for the fresh insights they could bring, and maintaining a random approach to maximize potential discoveries.

In “The Invisible Generation,” from the epilogue of his 1962 cut-up novel *The Ticket That Exploded* he describes a series of techniques to turn an ordinary magnetic tape recorder into a random audio mash-up machine. While this is not so new and far easier today, Stang and other

SubGenii painstakingly recorded, cut and spliced magnetic tape to create their early audio collages. Burroughs describes some things to try:

...a tape recorder can play back fast slow or backwards you can learn to do these things record a sentence and speed it up now try imitating your accelerated voice play a sentence backwards and learn to unsay what you just said....such exercises bring you a liberation from old association locks...do this several times creating arbitrary juxtapositions you will notice that the arbitrary cuts are appropriate in many cases and your cut up tape makes surprising sense...(Audio Culture 335-336).

Burroughs advocates a variety of techniques and tactics to collect everyday sound, cut it up, rearrange it, partially record over it adding a different layer of sound, concealed microphone work to capture ambient noise and conversation, re-mixing it all into a collage where randomness is the only rule – surprising insights arise from such serendipitous juxtapositions, a rhetorical strategy recommended by McLuhan and shared by Burke and the Church of the SubGenius.



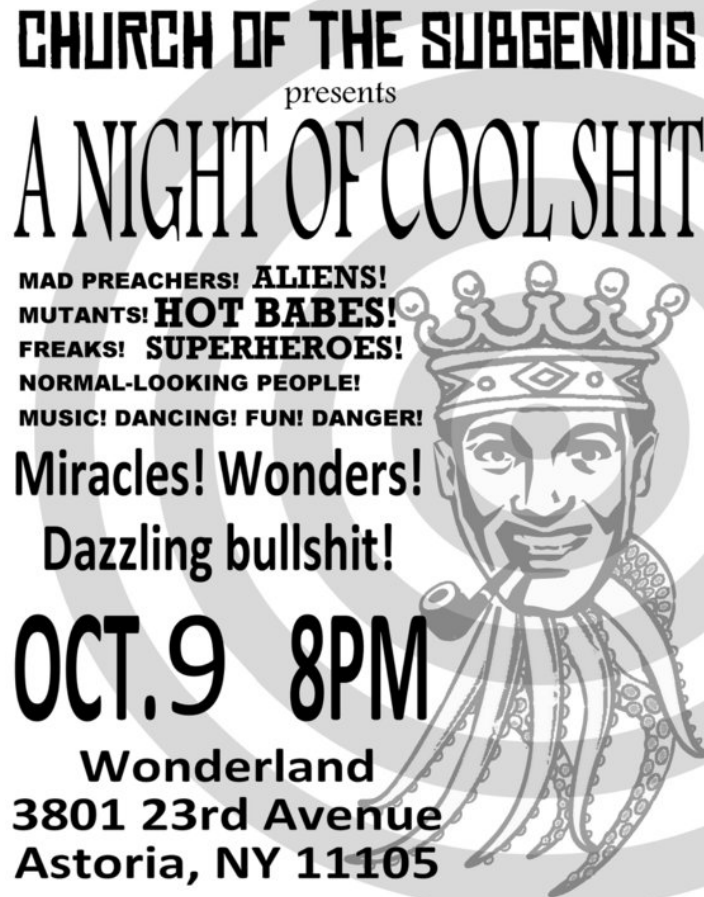
**Specializing in Fraudulent but Profound Explanations for Inexplicable Manifestations
Since The Future Began**

The official dogma of the Church of the SubGenius states that the church began in 1953, the same year the Church of Scientology was incorporated. According to Stang's "How to Run Your Own Cult" course taught at Robert Anton Wilson's Maybe Logic Academy in 2006:

"Doctrine has it that the SubGenius concept was first delivered to the Saint of Sales, J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs, by an ageless alien space monster JHVH-1, in 1953, in 'Bob's' rumpus room in the basement of his house in Wichita, Kansas, where he was living at the time.

The following selective timeline is from the SubGenius archives that Ivan Stang collected on four DVDs of church history, texts, images, audio and video. Particularly interesting and detailed is his 71-page "SubG Timeline" arranged in a two column table with most of the text in the right column in a series of telegraphic lines arranged chronologically from 1953 to 2008 noting major events like book publication and performances alongside personal, sometimes intimate minutiae such as health and relationship issues. The following are selected dates of potential significance for understanding cultural penetration and audience clues as well providing a few examples of the power of "comic frame" rhetoric in the strong reactions that Church of the SubGenius satire sometimes evokes.

The devival flyer below exhibits SubGenius visual and verbal rhetoric that includes the reflexivity built into Burke's comic frame, not taking themselves too seriously as "Mad Preachers! Aliens! Mutants!" and "Freaks" perform typical revival "miracles and wonders" along with the more honest "dazzling bullshit."



Devival flyer (Archive)

Selected SubGenius History

- **1976:** First Lakota Yuwipi ceremony (23) at medicine man Robert Steed's home. First learned about Native American Trickster figures.
- **1980:** Simon & Schuster sends a rejection letter for *The Book of the SubGenius* but seven years later they produce its 17th printing.
- **1981:** SubGenius audio tapes played by Irwin Chusic on WFMU and by Blaze Brown and Huey on KPFT Houston. DEVO shows interest in the Church of the SubGenius and R. Crumb asks to reprint the SubGenius pamphlet in his Weirdo #1 and #3. This is also the first year the Church is mentioned on the Internet. September 11 of this year, the church is incorporated in Texas.

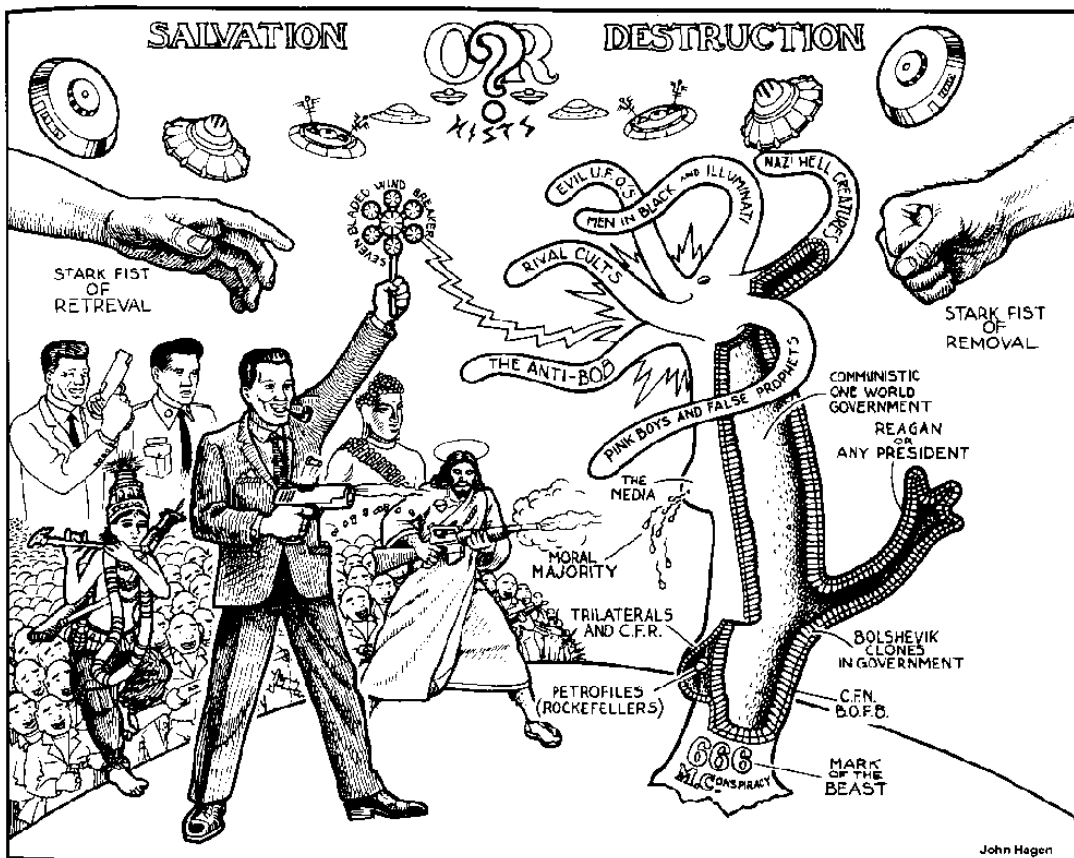
- **1982:** Proposal for *The Book of the SubGenius* is sent to McGraw Hill and Doubleday begins to show interest. In April, McGraw-Hill wins book auction against Doubleday and Macmillan.
- **1983:** First printing of *The Book of the SubGenius by McGraw-Hill*.
“Secret Service came to visit -- wanted to know about Salvation or Destr. drawing (in third FIST?) and JFK refs. Salv. or Dest. pic used a week later in People Magazine Aug. 29 issue! (Also revised by DEVO for New Trad poster)”
- **1984:** *Negativland* performs their second live show during a SubGenius “Night of Slack Devival” at Victoria Theater in San Francisco.
- **1985:** The *Hour of Slack* is first broadcast from KNON a Dallas radio station.
- **1986:** The face of “Bob” appears on an image-laden refrigerator, just below a picture of George Washington, in the introduction to episodes 26-46 of *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*
- **1988:** *High Weirdness By Mail* published, “zillions (it seems) of Bobzines published by fans.”
- **1989:** “*Bob’s*” *Favorite Comics* is published by Rip Off Press, Paul Mavrides editor. *U.S. News & World Report* publishes article about SubGenius in November issue.
- **1990:** SubGenius art show featuring Paul Mavrides at the Psychedelic Solution Gallery in NYC. In October of that year Rev. Stang performs a devival at Columbia University.
- **1991:** Stang begins working on SubGenius commercial for MTV.
- **1992:** “Total SubG members whose addresses are known: 3,950 Largest total: 4,980, but thousands moved”
- **1994:** “‘BOB’S’ SLACKTIME FUNHOUSE’ begins -- Rev. Susie the Floozy's radio show on **WREK**, Atlanta and *Revelation X* is published.
- **1995:** “Jan. 31 - Stang on Jon Stewart Show taping, interview with reporter Mike for Washington Post” Church website subgenius.com created. Rev. Stang opens for GWAR but after five shows, metal audience seems impatient with spoken word. Church mentioned in Douglas Rushkoff’s *Media Virus*
- **1996:** Eschatological spoofing: July 5, first “X-Day Drill”
- **1997:** March 26, Heaven’s Gate ritual suicide.
May, Rev. Stang preaches at Rutgers University
- **1998:** X-Day July 5 – the saucers do not arrive
Garland Police "Satanic Investigation Team" invade SubGenius office (Bevilacqua

house) when only Nickie is there, terrorize her.

X-Day approaching -- FBI in Cleveland calls Sherman NY sheriff to warn of "suicide cult"

- **1999:** Church moves from Dallas to Cleveland
- **2000:** "Bob" voted fraud of the century by TIME online poll
- **2001:** Devival in Hamburg, Germany
- **2004:** X-Day at Brighton, England, European Devival Tour
- **2008:** Second SubGenius course taught at Maybe Logic Academy
XM Radio considers running *Hour of Slack* but balks at request for more than \$600 for one year of daily commercial airplay

Causes of 1983 Secret Service visit?





PUZZLING
EVIDENCE
DWELLMAN

GENETIC X
EQUIVALENT
P. MAVRICE



* JOHN LENNON WAS SILENCED. About a week before his death he told "Bob" of his plans to reveal on network TV that the real Paul McCartney IS dead, having been replaced in '69 by the simpering clone now whining out Conspiracy disco-propaganda to mindless tepidity-addicts. Chapman, Lennon's killer, was a classic UFO dupe. The Men In Black started beaming predictions into this sap's head in 1978. The predictions, of course, came true, convincing Chapman that he'd been singled out by the 'Space Brothers' as a messenger. The MIBs then instructed him to shoot his former hero, and, like any good "Contactee," Chapman obliged.

Don't be totally disheartened, though -- technically, the Conspiracy DIDN'T get Lennon. He had actually JUST DIED from a DRUG OVERDOSE moments prior to being shot. So, in the end, Chapman's bullets were wasted.

Besides, look at it this way. Lennon is now 'getting down' with fellow Aetherguides Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Sid Vicious, Lenny Bruce, J.S. Bach, John Coltrane, Jim Jones and others in a cosmic jam session the likes of which NO LIVING MAN BUT "BOB" will ever hear.

An interesting note: Not only Chapman, but also Reagan-misser HINCKLEY applied for \$10 Membership in the Church in 1979. Both were turned down due to what Dr. Drummond termed "disquieting Nental life psi-emanations" permeating their application questionnaires.

Thanks to the Puzzling Evidence and Genetic Equivalent News Services for much of the inside poop on John.

* There was a nuclear storage accident in New Mexico last February which killed over 1,300 workers. Also, a germ-bomb goof in Montana turned 2,000 soldiers into mutant lunatics. Don't even bother looking for mention of these in the controlled media.

* There were 8,000 unexplained livestock mutilations last year, not 800. About 400 of these, however, were part of SubGenius initiation tests. Another 750 or so, mostly in Latin America, have been attributed to 'El Toro Grande' or 'El Diablo,' the 400-foot-tall devil bull of legend now known to be companion to the 900-foot "Jesus" seen by Oral Roberts. The giant Jesus, by the way, is a clever fake perpetrated by Venusians.

This probably sounds like so much bullshit to you. FINE. Have it your way.

It might be tempting to dismiss the significance of the text and images above but the 1983 visit from the Secret Service suggests that such satirical rhetoric and symbolic tinkering are seriously considered potentially threatening. In the “Salvation or Destruction?” cartoon above we have an image that features “Bob” fighting against a six-tentacled monster with characters and icons that exemplify SubGenius teachings, especially those about X-Day (their apocalypse), UFOs and conspiracies about assassination and “communistic one-world government.” In the page above from the SubGenius ‘zine *The Stark Fist of Removal* we can see a mix of facts and fiction in traditional text format beneath two collage images that focus satirically on assassination conspiracies about JFK, Paul McCartney and Reagan.



1980 SubGenii posing at Dealy Plaza with circled shooter locations in background. (Archive)



Chapter 3

Academic Responses – a brief survey of the literature

In contrast to the occasionally alarmed attention of law enforcement to the Church of the SubGenius, academia has hardly bothered to take a second look at “Bob.” Until the 2010 publication of Carole Cusack’s *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* there had been little serious examination of the Church of the SubGenius. As Cusack notes in her work, “most critics are hostile, in the sense that they are certain that the Church of the SubGenius is a childish prank and nothing more” (90). The few references that can be found are usually brief and dismissive. For example, Paul Mann’s May 1995 *Postmodern Culture* essay “Stupid Undergrounds” describes the Church of the SubGenius as “worthless...expansive, [and] aggressively sophomoric” in his criticism of various underground challenges to traditional rationality (3). Cusack also notes Mann’s scathing assessment of the CoSG, writing that he has “foamed at the mouth over J.R. “Bob” Dobbs” and dismisses the impact of their satire.

Though Mann’s complaint seems to miss the complexity of SubGenius parody, he also seems offended by the energy of the SubGenius’ voluntary creative participation in collective critique: “the cult of Dobbs crystallizes a rabid *overparticipation* in the stupid spectacle of the real that goes far beyond any ‘blank parody’ or ‘postmodern pastiche’” (24 italics mine). In an age that has been noted for increasing isolation and disengagement, participation seems an odd thing to condemn. As CoSG history reveals, the rhetorical performance of the Church of the SubGenius can sometimes evoke passionate, if misguided, responses – and they have not been

limited to mere academic polemics.

A more insightful, rhetorically focused comment on the Church of the SubGenius comes from James Weissinger's April 2007 *Haverford Journal* essay "The New Traditionalists: Baudrillard, Devo and the Post-modern De-evolution of the Simulation." It is interesting to note that Weissinger focuses on rhetoric to describe SubGenius impact on Devo:

the pseudo-religious organization's rhetoric forms yet another pillar of Devo's de-evolutionary philosophy. The Church is an artificial, postmodern religion that ordains priests, such as founding Devo member Mark Mothersbaugh, at the low-low price of \$29.95 (4).

Beginning with Devo's interested response to a SubGenius pamphlet, Stang (as Doug Smith) continued to work with Devo, eventually helping to shoot their music video "Are You Experienced" in 1984 (Timeline).

A slightly more extensive discussion of the Church of the SubGenius appears in *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy* by William A. Covino in his chapter "Grimoires and Witches" where he discusses the paradox that occurs when a group works to maintain "a cultish mentality" while simultaneously "promoting the vision of a critical polis engaged with a pluriverse of volubility." Though Covino offers some useful and sophisticated observations about the CoSG, he tips his hand early when he writes that "'The Book of the SubGenius' revels viciously in that paradox" (136). Covino appreciatively notes that "*The Book* acknowledges our vulnerability to arresting magic with a comic vision of social critique in which nuggets of wisdom are admitted as fool's gold, and ideology is a commodity" (136).

Covino further characterizes the Church with phrases that suggest his mixed feelings

about what it signifies, “a world of phantasy gone wild” as well as “a protean sophistry” are both accurate if subtly negative. Connotatively considered, the creative results of protean fantasy contain the threats of deliberate deception and chaos, a fear as old as Plato’s concern over the subversive nature of poetry. However, Covino accurately articulates the SubGenius mission to “counteract the cultural agents of thought control” and to reject fixity in thinking and values. In a unique observation, Covino demonstrates some interesting rhetorical parallels between the description of “Bob” from *The Book* and a contemporary description of the Goddess by author-activist Starhawk (138).

Perhaps the most significant contribution from Covino is his parallel of the Church of the SubGenius with Marcuse’s Great Refusal, both countering the “commodification of culture” the latter being “serious philosophical critique” while the former risks riotous explosion. However, the result of this metaphorical explosion would be “riotous acknowledgement that – as Burke, Adorno, and Marcuse fear – the worship of money-as-god-term is universal, and the only effective counter magic is transcendence through nonstop style metamorphosis, the rhetorical fallacy that evades all bids for belief, and markets whatever sells.” Here Covino insightfully describes the mechanism of SubGenius “counter magic” that results in a transcendence of all attempts to fix definition or invite belief by the conscious and constant metamorphosis of style (139).

In spite of his evocation of Burke, Adorno and Marcuse it seems Covino’s final analysis of the Church of the SubGenius is tainted by the hyperbolic observations of former SubGenius Jay Kinney as recorded in the Fall 1986 issue of *Whole Earth Review*. Kinney fears that “the Church’s widespread cynicism is a license for widespread hatred,” and further that “the Church’s absolute cynicism is tantamount to fascism.” Though “rants” and tinkering with fascistic

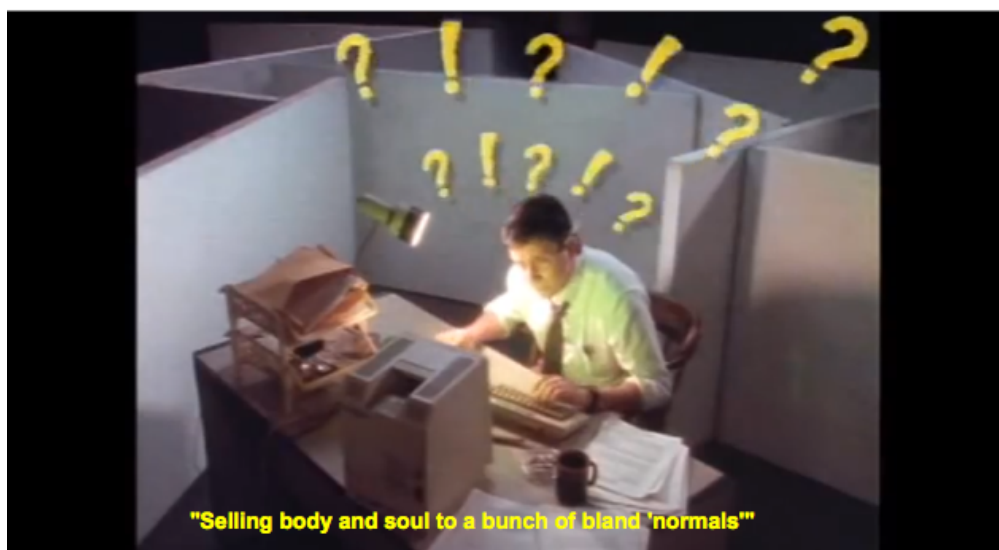
symbols are satirical staples of SubGenius performance, the leap in logic is large that brings us to genuine hatred and fascism. Actual fascism involves an accurately calculated number of identical followers tightly united in scrupulously organized support of their leader – none of which are characteristic of SubGenius behavior.

Exact membership of the Church of the SubGenius is indeterminate precisely because they are not at all fascist but rather a *very* loosely organized, amorphous group of non-joiners who are expected to be heretical by splitting off to form their own groups and mythologies. However, the extremity of the “fascist” suggestion reveals a deep-seated fear that the “post-modern” SubGenius “suspicion and fragmentation of all master narratives may lead to the dissolution of justice” (139-140). And to be fair, the Church of the SubGenius deliberately pokes at such fears, but it does so for fun and to promote the reflexivity that can help us to escape their mortifying clutches – not to dissolve justice.

Among academic responses, Carole Cusack’s *Invented Religions* represents the first thorough and thoughtful analysis of the Church of the SubGenius making it a central text in my brief review of the literature. Cusack’s analysis uses a religious lens, even though the church is not actually a tax-exempt, traditionally “religious” organization with weekly services, collection plates and a central office. Nevertheless, Cusack argues that, in the context of 17th century English Ranters, the Church of the SubGenius has a “legitimate pedigree in the history of Western religion, one that stresses anarchic protest, sensual indulgence and innate divinity”(107). Noting the abundance of artists, writers, musicians, performers and other creatives in the CoSG, Cusack contends that the church is “arguably a legitimate path to liberation in a world dominated by work and money...protest against the soulless wage slavery and empty materialism that prevails in contemporary Western society” (84).

In her analysis of the CoSG Cusack includes the observations of Stephen Lamborn Wilson who writes as Hakim Bey, a “post-anarchist” writer who has expressed similar criticism of Western economic alienation. Bey is most celebrated as the author of *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy and Poetic Terrorism*, an underground poetic philosophical work published in 1991 by Autonomedia, also freely available online. Burke, too, had deep concern for what he termed “the ‘alienations’ of contemporary society and he seems to prefigure the SubGenius concept of “the Conspiracy” nearly describing the image below from the 1991 SubGenius MTV spot:

The necessities of earning a living may induce men actually to compete ‘of their own free will’ to get the most incredible kinds of jobs, *jobs that make them rot in the dark while the sun is shining, or warp their bodies and their minds by overlong sedentary regimentation and grotesque devotion to all the unadventurous tasks of filing and recording* that our enormous superstructure, for manipulating the mere abstract symbols of exchange, has built up (*ATH 174 italics mine*).



Cusack briefly explores Bey's concept of the T.A.Z. and his promotion of "culture jamming" a term originally coined by the band Negativland, another group influenced by the Church of the SubGenius. Bey argues that as we are shaped by technology and monitored by governments, individual autonomy is increasingly diminished so "temporary autonomous zones" become necessary to provide places of unmonitored, free interaction. Cusack sees Church of the SubGenius devivals as an example of Bey's T.A.Z. concept in action. Equally relevant to the CoSG, in his chapter "Chaos," Bey discusses the pirating of signs and meanings by "avatars of chaos" that are described much like tricksters:

Avatars of chaos act as spies, saboteurs, criminals of amour fou, neither selfless nor selfish, accessible as children, mannered as barbarians, chafed with obsessions, unemployed, sensually deranged, wolfangels, mirrors for contemplation, eyes like flowers, pirates of all signs & meanings.

The word "piracy" essentially means the capture and unauthorized use of something valuable, and in this case the Church of the SubGenius and individual SubGenii are the "pirates of all signs and meanings" capturing and repurposing cultural icons, titles, uniforms, practices and authoritative symbols and re-deploying them as "mirrors for contemplation." This concept of reflective contemplation is also present in Burke's discussion of "comic correctives" in *Attitudes Toward History* where he writes "the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*...One would transcend himself by noting his own foibles" (171). This reflexivity is also a central feature of SubGenius rhetoric as noted above in their first admittedly "baroquely cheesy pamphlet."

Finally, Cusack connects the Church of the SubGenius to the Situationists and Guy

Debord's 1967 work *Society of the Spectacle*. Cusack's synopsis of the Situationist movement could as easily describe the philosophy and practice of the CoSG, noting that they

developed a sophisticated critique of contemporary culture ...rejected copyright and encouraged the reproduction of all Situationist pamphlets and materials,...deeply aware of the fact that protest movements were often subsumed by the host society against which they protested...(92)

The SubGenii, like the Situationists, commandeer popular culture styles, images and language to repurpose them with satirical re-inscriptions that heckle the culture of constant work and passive consumption that leads to increasing alienation. These acts, now called "culture jamming" are a playful attempt to resist corporate commoditization of life and reclaim the leisure necessary for creative expression without becoming "subsumed" and re-commoditized. In Thesis 11 Debord indicates that such tactics are necessary because "To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression."

Kenneth Burke suggests a similar deliberate and methodical approach in his chapter "Comic Correctives" in *Attitudes Toward History*. Emphasizing the necessity of strategy and the specific value of the comic in countering spectacular propaganda, Burke writes "propagandistic (didactic) strategy...must be employed as an essentially *comic* notion, containing two-way attributes lacking in polemical, one-way approaches to social necessity" sometimes associated with academic discourse (166).



Mavrides image in Medieval wood cut style, a visual commentary on institutional education. (Archives)

Though neither Rev. Stang, nor SubGenius literature overtly refer to Debord's "spectacle" the concept seems to have some parallel with the SubGenius idea of "The Conspiracy" which is central to their worldview. The Conspiracy, always capitalized, refers to cultural pressures of conformity, normality, unceasing work, decreasing leisure and the commoditized experience. It is somewhat akin to Debord's Thesis 5 description of the spectacle as "a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm a world view transformed into an objective force." A central mission of the Church of the SubGenius is to resist the commodity-conforming influence of this weltanschauung and part of this resistance is the deliberate introduction of chaos, a practice inspired by Hill and Thornley's *Principia*

Discordia and Discordianism which Stang acknowledges is a “precursor” to the Church of the SubGenius in *Hour of Slack* # 91 when he interviews Discordian Pope Robert Anton Wilson, author of *The Illuminatus!* Trilogy.

The most recent academic work to take the Church of the SubGenius seriously is *Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World* published in 2014 by one-time SubGenius and current University of Iowa Communications Studies professor Kembrew McLeod. Though McLeod only traces the beginnings of the Church of the SubGenius, he discusses the Yes Men for several pages, citing them as “new-model activists” in the same spirit as the Church of the SubGenius (254). McLeod traces American pranks back to Benjamin Franklin and his needling of local astrologer Titan Leeds by pseudonymously publishing Leeds’ obituary and the astrological signs that accompanied his death, provoking the astrologer into publishing an irate reply (2).

Calling them “playful critiques performed within the public sphere and amplified by media” McLeod articulates the educational and social empowerment potential in the “instructive amusement” of pranking (5-6).

By staging these semiserious, semihumorous spectacles, pranksters try to spark important debates and, in some instances, provoke social change....Although ‘good’ pranks sometimes do ridicule their targets, they serve a higher purpose by sowing skepticism and speaking truth to power (or at least cracking jokes that expose fissures in power’s façade) (4).

SubGenius spectacle may sow such skepticism but it is performed primarily for the pleasure of the participants and not for financial gain, a central tenet in the philosophy expressed in Hakim Bey’s “Immediatism” *Radio Sermonette*: “real art is play, and play is one of the most immediate

of all experiences...we miss the directness of play, our original kick in doing art in the first place. We miss smell, taste, touch, the feel of bodies in motion” (hermetic.com).

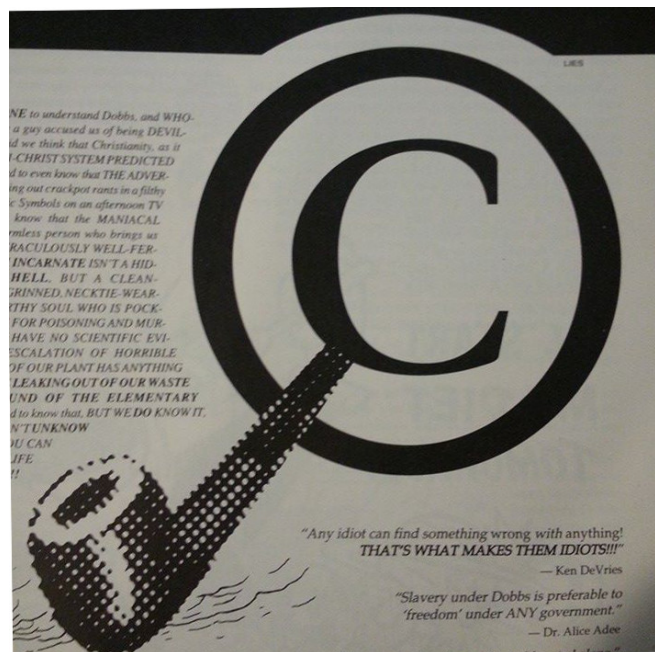


Devival Set at Victoria Theater, San Francisco - site of “Bob’s” assassination and the 2nd performance of Negativland January 1984. (Archive)

Although SubGenius creativity may not be performed, as McLeod suggests, to “spark important debates” or to “provoke social change,” the irreverent pranksterism of the Church of the SubGenius has nevertheless seeped into our mediascape. As McLeod writes, “a prank is like a humorous role-playing adventure in which people, ideas and language all have leading parts...these cognitive acts can bleed over into the social world, moving people to action” (7).

A final resource from outside the academy that is worth considering is the analysis of “culture jamming” by writer Mark Dery whose essay “Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs” is a brief but rich introduction to the concept and its theoretical origins. An unusual aspect of Dery’s essay is that his Introduction to the essay’s 2010 reprint is focused on establishing that he was the originator of the term “culture jamming” having been

inspired by Negativland's previously expressed concept of "cultural jamming" and that he was the first to put it in print in his December 1990 *New York Times* article "The Merry Pranksters and the Art of the Hoax" which is his first survey of the phenomenon. Another relevant phrase Dery introduces for which he is eager to claim paternity is "guerrilla semiotics" (©Mark Dery; all rights reserved) a term for which he admits to inspiration from Umberto Eco's phrase "semiological guerilla warfare". Though Burke tends to avoid warfare metaphors, this concept sounds quite similar to his idea of symbolic tinkering.



Logo from *Revelation X* chapter 2 "Conspiracy" (15)

In a discussion about creatively subverting paradigms of domination and control Dery's copyrighted terminology seems an odd focus for his attention, especially since he explicitly sympathizes with a critique of "complicity in the commodification of anti-consumerism" in his "Culture Jamming" essay. Following the establishment of his invention of the terms "culture jamming" and "guerrilla semiotics" Dery then requests that his work be cited with a copyright symbol thus: "©Mark Dery; all rights reserved." Though it is unclear whether Dery is being

satirical or unusually concerned with staking out credit for linguistic invention, he nevertheless generously offers his essay for educational use without cost if cited with the copyright symbol.

In “Culture Jamming” Dery cites the Church of the SubGenius and Rev. Stang along with Negativland and other media hoaxers as “poster children for culture jamming—media age provocateurs who expose ‘the ways in which corporate and political interests use the media as a tool of behavior modification’” (“Culture Jamming” ©Mark Dery; all rights reserved). And, to ensure full credit, the citation within the above citation is also by Dery from his 1990 article (“Merry Pranksters” “©Mark Dery; all rights reserved).

Aside from his eagerness for credit, Dery’s essays are a useful review of the history and theory of culture jamming, tracing the “jamming” part of his copyrighted phrase derives from an illegal CB radio practice of breaking in on another’s transmission with nonsense and noises. Dery contrasts this apolitical play with culture jamming which “is directed against an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols” (©Mark Dery; all rights reserved). Like Cusack, Dery acknowledges the influence of Hakim Bey’s *Temporary Autonomous Zone* but he adds Baudrillard’s essay “The Precession of Simulacra” and “hyperreality” to the discussion.

Dery defines hyperreality as “a hall of media mirrors in which reality has been lost in an infinity of reflections. We ‘experience’ events, first and foremost, as electronic reproductions of rumored phenomena many times removed” (©Mark Dery; all rights reserved). As Bey argues, experience becomes prepackaged and branded and we are pleasantly edged further and further from “the terrors of direct experience” as E. M. Forster puts it in his prescient 1909 story “The Machine Stops.” Baudrillard’s own definition of the hyperreal is metaphorical but clarifies the concept of “precession.”

Simulation is...the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map...the map precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory (*Simulacra* 1).

More and more, in human experience, a model of experience chronologically precedes our actual direct experience, perhaps a natural kind of precedence that is often used when teaching a skill. Baudrillard's concern however is for the kind of "precedence" that ranks the simulation *above* its original referent, so in the precession of simulacra not only do we develop a preference for the simulation over the real, the simulation itself "engenders the territory" or gives birth to the real - the hyperreality of endless simulations more authoritative than reality itself.

In addition to outlining some theoretical origins of culture jamming, Dery notes the flexibility and varied applications of culture jamming and counts Russian samizdat works among them. Evgeny Zamyatin's 1922 novel *We* comes to mind here, first distributed via illicit hand-made copy after the Stalinists banned publication for its critique of a micro-managed, schedule-worshipping "One State" that eliminated creativity via lobotomy, a world Stalinists found uncomfortably familiar. The word samizdat itself is Russian for "self-publishing house" a concept suggesting the need to broadcast information that would not be allowed by communication gatekeepers.

In the culture jammer's quiver Dery also includes Yippee street theater, audio agit-prop and the re-purposing of billboards he calls "billboard banditry" – just a few of the many ways jamming is accomplished. These are also some of the semiotic practices of the Church of the SubGenius, though motivated more by fun than politics. SubGenii are more like the culture jammers Dery describes as "Groucho Marxists, ever mindful of the fun to be had in the joyful

demolition of oppressive ideologies” (©Mark Dery; all rights reserved). While Dery’s phrase “demolition of oppressive ideologies” suggests semiotic guerrilla warfare, McLeod’s *Pranksters* sees the prank more as a playful way to promote discussion and positive social change that naturally erodes oppressive ideologies with cascades of satirical laughter.



1981 SubGenius “billboard banditry” with added “B” and the face of “Bob” (Archive)

It is interesting to note that the first definition of “prank” in the OED is from 1440 and is of uncertain etymology, but originally the word referred to *folds* or *pleats* in a piece of cloth. The semantic connection of “prank” to trickery did not arrive until around 1529. The connection between folded fabric and a trick may have to do with how pleating a piece of fabric camouflages its actual size with folds that create alternating seen and unseen spaces that open and close with movement. Similarly, a prank is like a folded textile of discourse that conceals and reveals, forcing close attention and revealing new perspectives that, as McLeod writes, can “[turn] the world upside down – even for a brief moment – [to] be seen from a new vantage

point” (274). Though academia has been slow to acknowledge the validity of the Church of the SubGenius as a subject of study, as this brief review suggests, CoSG rhetorical practice is more than just puerile prattle but rather, as McLeod suggests “a form of edutainment – an instructive amusement that can make perpetrators, victims, and witnesses wiser...[for] even hoaxes and cons can sharpen our critical thinking skills” (6).

Don J. Waisanen has observed the deployment of Burke’s “comic frame” and “perspective by incongruity” by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert demonstrates “how Stewart and Colbert’s symbolic actions function to (re)fashion political frames of reference.” Further, Waisanen acknowledges the specific and positive impact of their use of Burkean rhetoric and its ability to both amuse and awaken a more critical perspective:

Stewart and Colbert are more than simply entertainers, they are rhetorical critics, who creatively guide audiences toward democratic possibilities. That is, they both critique and innovate upon the suasive phenomena of contemporary public life, to activate new insights about acts of human communication....Both Stewart and Colbert draw attention to and debunk social absurdities and contradictions, while often providing incipient alternatives to myopic orientations (120-121).

Waisanen’s use of the phrase “innovate upon the suasive phenomena of contemporary public life” is worth discussing briefly. The innovation and re-deployment of those cultural phenomena that urge us towards particular goals (i.e. hierarchy, obedience, conformity, consumerism) is a practice that goes back to the Situationists and Debord and continues today in Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert – and the Church of the SubGenius.



Chapter 4

Kenneth Burke: Ranging Rhetorician and Social Critic

According to William H. Rueckert, in the 1980s Kenneth Burke's ideas were "finally recognized and celebrated in a way that was commensurate with his achievements" when speech communications scholars found his insights stimulated a revival of their discipline, however most people and even many scholars today are unfamiliar with Kenneth Burke (*Encounters* xiii). His theories have been applied in an array of academic disciplines from English and Rhetoric to Communication studies and Sociology, but outside of English and Rhetoric his name and contributions are not widely known. As Simons claims in *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, "no doubt part of the reason Burke has not reached a wider audience is academic encrustation" (11).

The notion of academic resistance to creative thinking and change has become a pop culture stereotype that many students and teachers experience daily in an educational system still largely organized around the factory hierarchy model. Such "encrustation," wherever it occurs, is a rigid and stale state of thought that is critiqued and assiduously avoided by both Burke and the Church of the SubGenius. So, for readers who may not know of Burke dynamic mind, a brief overview of his life and unorthodox thinking is here provided to help orient the unfamiliar and inspire the heretic. I will introduce some of his rhetorical insights and key concepts in this chapter followed by a survey the central text for my rhetorical analysis, Burke's *Attitudes Toward History*. This survey will be interspersed with SubGenius passages that exemplify a

particular concept from *Attitudes*. However, the central application of his rhetorical theory will be developed in chapter 7 “Burke’s Rhetoric Applied: *Hour of Slack* and *Revelation X*.”

Academic rhetoricians are generally not celebrities in 21st Century America, but if Kenneth Burke were alive today a few facts about his learning and his life might make him an academic celebrity surprisingly in tune with contemporary political trends and values – especially his “ranging” interdisciplinary thinking and his “symbolic tinkering” and “comic frame” perspective on life and communication.

In “Kenneth Burke: Pioneer of Ecocriticism” Laurence Coupe summarizes Burke’s impact, noting that “nearly every handbook of critical theory acknowledges Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) to be the twentieth-century North American critic who was most ahead of his time” (413) and this legacy is also interdisciplinary, drawing from and influencing an array of academic divisions beyond rhetoric, literary theory and criticism. Ann Branaman, writing for *The Sociological Quarterly* defines Burke as “a poet, literary critic, social critic, and philosopher of language” who has “exerted an influence in American Sociology” most notably inspiring C. Wright Mills’ concept of the “vocabulary of motive (443).”

Over the course of his vigorous career, Burke published 21 books, 31 short stories, 65 poems, 169 essays, 158 reviews, 26 pieces of musical criticism as well as commentary, speeches and interviews (*KB Journal*). In 1981 he was awarded the National Medal for Literature by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Bizzell and Herzberg describe Burke’s fifty-year career as “an attempt to redefine and expand the scope of rhetorical analysis and to apply it to all forms of language use” with a particular emphasis on “analyzing the way in which language systems...describe and influence human motives” (1295). Burke’s interdisciplinary mind invented a wide array of rhetorical systems and

concepts from his “Dramatistic Pentad” system of Act, Scene, Agent, Agency and Purpose to his exploration of “Psychology and Form” in the arts and his “Lexicon Rhetorica” not to mention his many works of fiction and poetry. Rather than attempting a survey of his many complex contributions, this essay will focus on a rhetorical analysis of the Church of the SubGenius by applying Burke’s observations about human “symbolicity,” his theory of “comic frame” rhetoric and the necessity of “symbolic tinkering” as revealed in *Attitudes Toward History* and other texts.

Born in 1897 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Burke knew early that he was a “word man.” Though he spent a few semesters at Ohio State and Columbia, Burke found the structure of institutional education too restrictive and pursued his own course of studies, in his own wandering way. In 1919 he married Lillian Mary Batterham (“Lilly”) and lived in Greenwich Village where Burke wrote fiction, criticism and reviews, eventually befriending e.e. cummings, Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams. In 1922 they left New York City and moved to the countryside of Andover, New Jersey where they had three daughters in a marriage of almost fourteen years.

Burke and Lilly divorced in 1933 and Burke moved down the road and married her sister Elizabeth (“Libby”) with whom he had two sons. Burke continued to teach, write and publish even as he fetched the household water from their well with a regular metal bucket - sometimes by lamplight. Over the years, Burke bought adjacent parcels of land along with an old pig barn that he converted into guest quarters for his children and eventually his grandchildren. Along with the pond and tennis court, the two households and their guest quarters, regularly populated with his children and grandchildren, composed a cozy little community where Burke occasionally entertained, drinking prodigiously and engaging in lively discussion on long, late-

night walks (Rueckert 55-56, 90). Add a solar panel or a windmill and Burke becomes a communal, “off the grid,” edupunk scholar.

Whether we consider Kenneth Burke’s un-doctored education, his “ranging” interdisciplinary mind, his willingness to transcend orthodox disciplinary thinking, or his unique domestic community, Kenneth Burke might also be considered a secular heretic. The OED tells us that etymology of the word *heretic* is from the Greek for “able to choose” and Burke’s well-intentioned speech at the First American Writer’s Conference in 1935 demonstrated his ability to choose ideas that fell outside the boundaries of doctrinaire Communist thought in his attempt to further the cause with a minor rhetorical revision. His good intentions were not well received.

The American Writer’s Conference on April 26, 1935 was a diverse gathering of “216 of the most politically engaged literary figures in America...Europe and Latin America...” including 36 women and 21 African-Americans (George & Selzer 47). When Burke gave his “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” speech at the conference, he sought to empower the Left with a thoughtful analysis of diction and connotation, but he was severely criticized by fellow writers. As Frank Lentriccia records in his analysis of the speech, a key leader of the conference, Joseph Freeman, stood up and shouted out “We have a traitor among us!” (Simons 282).

Though the word “propaganda” has come to have primarily negative connotations, its root meaning comes from the word for “propagate” as in to spread or reproduce a plant - or an idea. While Burke’s focus was on improving propaganda by revising word choice, his critics were more concerned with a kind of Marxist rhetorical purity. Burke’s well-meaning suggestion is that the phrase “the workers” should be replaced with “the people” to reach out to a broader audience as a “tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of unity.” Burke emphasized that he was discussing the symbol of the worker “*purely from the standpoint of*

propaganda” and how the Communists “focus their scheme of allegiance about the symbol of the worker” in a way that might alienate the rest of the populace and work against “our present attempts at historic cooperation” (Burke “Revolutionary Symbolism” in Simons & Melia 268). The cry of “traitor” suggests that Burke’s audience was more attuned to orthodox obedience than reflexive revision.

This kind of revision-oriented mindset is evident in the multiple editions of his books and their accompanying new introductions, afterwords and conclusions but also in his “Definition of Man” as “the symbol-using animal,” a definition for which he invites reader participation to “decide what should be added, or subtracted, or in some way modified.” While he invites our participation, he also soberly acknowledges “the full extent of the role played by symbolicity” in our conceptions of reality, declaring that

however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand [it] is but a construct of our symbol systems” the implications of which are “like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss (*Symbolic Action* 3-5).

Such a statement might easily be mistaken as nihilistic, but in spite of the potential terror, despair or stupor that might reasonably result from realizing the semantic construction of our realities, Burke remains undaunted in his commitment to a practical rhetoric that can help us understand as well as influence our world. If we constructed our world with symbols, we can also revise our composition of these symbols and thus slowly re-construct our world in more humane and sustainable ways.

One example of the practical application of rhetoric is Burke’s concept of “frames of acceptance” of which the “comic frame” is one. In *Attitudes Toward History* Burke defines a

frame of acceptance as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (5). Later, Burke further clarifies the meaning and explains the function of these frames:

‘Frames of acceptance’ are not the same as *passiveness*. Since they name both friendly and unfriendly forces, they fix attitudes that prepare for combat. They draw the lines of battle – and they appear ‘passive’ only to one whose frame would persuade him to draw the line of battle differently (*ATH* 20).

Burke’s insistence that rhetoric be engaged in promoting sociopolitical progress is clear in his 1935 American Writer’s Conference presentation, and this concern remains central in his 1955 Introduction to *Attitudes Toward History* when he suggests readers might choose one of several alternative titles:

“Attitudes Toward the Incessant Intermingling of Conservatism and Progress,” or “Statements of Policy on Problems of Organizational Behavior,” or
“Manual of Terms for a Public Relations Council with a Heart” (v).

Burke’s socioeconomic observations run throughout *Attitudes* as he applies his rhetorical analysis to the capitalism of his day – akin, though more socialist than today’s robustly laissez-faire model. Rueckert tells us that the “apparent collapse of capitalism as an economic and political system” guided Burke’s mind to reflect on “the relationship between economics, business, and the social good” (*Encounters* 57).

Sometimes his observations are conveyed by a double-edged metaphor. Though he is only using “banking” as a metaphor in the passage below, Burke’s insight that a complex symbolism is “a kind of spiritual currency” can be useful in understanding how various social and institutional systems work in terms of symbolic interaction. The other edge of Burke’s

metaphor is suggestive of the impact of the “banksters” of his day, but it is also eerily prescient in the wake of our recent financial crisis.

More importantly, Burke notes the necessity of “symbolic tinkering” to undermine the “superstructural frame” that facilitates such greedy symbolic manipulation and thereby counter its alienating influence:

A complex symbolism is a kind of 'spiritual currency' - and a group of 'bankers' may arise who manipulate this medium of exchange to their special benefit. Their efforts need not even be consciously directed to this end. The superstructural frame may so *function* regardless, producing dispossession and alienation largely as an 'unintended by-product.' All such eventualities lead to the necessity of symbolic tinkering. (179)

Burke’s “superstructural frame” seems a rough metaphor for a culture and the symbolic interaction of its various social and institutional structures. While we often use the word “technology” to reference physical objects, it also applies to non-physical things like digital data, methods of organization, systems and other useful structures made up of words. This “alienation” Burke defines in his Dictionary of Pivotal Terms is “that state of affairs wherein a man no longer ‘owns’ his world because, for one reason or another, it seems *basically unreasonable*” (216), a lack of agency in an irrational world.

Burke’s assertion that “the superstructural frame may so *function*” to produce this dispossession and alienation through symbolic manipulation might be read as giving too much agency to a non-physical system but, as we are learning in the age of Artificial Intelligence and Google, technology can/does/is take/ing on a life of its own. In 1963, long before our digital age, Jacques Ellul wrote about the influence and autonomy of technology, what he calls “technique:”

Technique elicits and conditions social, political and economic change. It is the prime mover of all the rest, in spite of any appearance to the contrary and in spite of human pride, which pretends that man's philosophical theories are still determining influences and man's political regimes decisive factors in technical evolution. External necessities no longer determine technique. Technique's own internal necessities are determinative. Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its own determinations...(133)

In Burke's 1983 Afterword in *Attitudes Toward History*, his perspective on technology is less determinative but he seems to realize that it is something that can, should and must be managed and that "a worldwide political system adequate to control its uses and misuses can somehow be contrived" (*ATH* 430).

Brief survey of relevant sections of *Attitudes Toward History*

William Rueckert, long-time student, scholar and friend of Kenneth Burke, accurately describes Burke's mind and characterizes *Attitudes Toward History* "Vitality, variety, energy, boundary breaking, and creativity – all essential characteristics of Burke's mind – everywhere abound in this most Emersonian book" (*Encounters* 36). Of Burke's many deeply insightful works, *Attitudes Toward History* seems the most appropriate framework for analysis of SubGenius rhetoric, not only for the "comic frame" and "symbolic tinkering" rhetoric, but also for its focus on the symbolic interactions involved in "forming and reforming congregations" of people. As Burke comments on the specific pronunciation of the book's title, he explains:

Though the tendency is to pronounce the title of this book with the accent on *history*, so far as meaning goes the accent should be on *attitudes*. And by 'history' is meant primarily man's life in political communities. The book then deals with

characteristic responses of people in their forming and reforming congregations.

(1955 Introduction i)

A final reason that this particular work of Burke promises to be a particularly useful text for analysis of SubGenius rhetoric is his discussion of the nature of ritual and his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” most particularly “Alienation,” “Bureaucratization of the Imaginative,” “Casuistic Stretching,” “Perspective by Incongruity and “Symbolic Mergers.”

Attitudes Toward History is divided into three main sections: Part I: Acceptance and Rejection, Part II: The Curve of History and Part III: Analysis of Symbolic Structure. Burke begins Part I by introducing his “frames of acceptance” through discussions of three writers, and it is here that we get some hint of parallels with the serendipitous approach of the Church of the SubGenius from a trio that Burke calls “perhaps the three most well-rounded, or at least the most picturesque, frames of acceptance in American literature are those of William James, Whitman and Emerson” (5).

Discussing William James’ unfettered thinking and approach to scholarship, Burke writes of James’ practical underlying motivation:

Much of James’s resistance to the procedures of his ‘respectable’ colleagues seems to have come from his conviction that they were in danger of dealing with too restricted a world...He also felt that too much of vital importance might, by the nature of the method, necessarily be left out of account (14).

Here we are reminded that respectability is often only granted to those who follow traditional methods while orthodox methodology can potentially blind the respectable ones to things of

“vital importance.” Burke’s observations about James also suggests the crucial value of multiple perspectives, and of taking account of ideas from outside of the orthodox system or method.

Burke continues his tripartite comparison, describing Whitman as James’ “poetic replica” who, “resorted to pluralism a way of seeing an organized unity of purpose behind diversity” (14). Burke then discusses the genius of Emerson’s concept of “polarity” whereby he can “confront evil with good cheer” because there is always “some compensatory good” in all evil. Burke labels Emerson’s affirmative approach as having a “*meliorist* emphasis...by the extending of cosmos farther into the realm of chaos, the reclaiming of chaos for cosmic purposes” (19).

In line with Burke’s introductory trinity of James, Whitman and Emerson, the Church of the SubGenius deliberately rejects fixed method or it deploys a mutation of traditional method for its own purposes such as the “devival.” Like Whitman, the Church of the SubGenius recognizes, encourages and generates a plurality of perspectives, definitions and doctrines. Like Emerson, the Church of the SubGenius pushes order “further into the realm of chaos,” not so much to reclaim the chaos and return the order of “cosmic purposes” but to surf the chaos and use it to generate inspiration for dynamic creative expression. Rather than reclaim chaos for cosmic purposes, SubGenii reinscribe chaos for comic as well as spiritual purposes.

An especially relevant concept in the first chapter of *Attitudes Toward History* is that of “rejection” which Burke says is a “by-product of ‘acceptance’” and involves “an attitude toward some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a *shift in the allegiance* to symbols of authority. It is the heretical aspect of an orthodoxy” (21). The Church of the SubGenius, in its rejection of traditional authorities, has seized orthodox symbols and deployed them heretically to satirize power and promote reflexivity in those subject to those symbols.

Finally, Burke takes a brief look at the reversal in the moral status of ambition, noting that Shakespeare's Macbeth "stands at the turning point between the feudal attitude towards ambition, as *punishable pride*, and the commercial attitude towards ambition, as the *essence of vocation*" which by Adam Smith's day, becomes established orthodoxy (24). Burke argues that this newly valorized ambition led to "commercial, quantitative tests for rationalizing conduct" eventually leading to "several centuries of fairly rational *organization*." Burke concludes that the result of this quantified, rational order has been a crop of "new material and moral resources...[that] after nearly half a millennium...seem to have been exploited to the point where they in turn are nearing their 'Malthusian limits'" (27). SubGenius teaching in *Revelation X* acknowledges our impact on the environment and urges us to imagine being the exploited by satirically casting humanity as little more than toxin generators for exploitive intergalactic alien industry:

Over the eons, aliens have been seeding planets across the Universe with humans...There is tremendous intergalactic demand for planets having atmospheres ripe with deadly hydrocarbons, pollution and heavy metal contaminants. It was long ago and far away discovered that if one takes a nice, virgin, carbon-oxygen planet of the right specifications, puts a few thousand humans on it, and leaves it alone for a couple of hundred thousand years, upon return it will be a wonderfully contaminated hell-planet, a veritable cornucopia of synthetic poisons. The aliens then transfer the few surviving humans, the most ruthless ones, to a fresh planet to begin the process anew. (11)

Human intelligence and technological prowess is such that we have an international space station

continually orbiting the Earth and we have a spacecraft exploring beyond our solar system, yet we continue to struggle with basic, solvable problems like environmental degradation. Human intelligence has yet to keep our hubris in check and prevent us from unnecessarily contaminating our only source of life.

In his chapter “Poetic Categories” Burke begins to sketch out the remedy of comic rhetoric: “like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shift from *crime to stupidity* “ (41). This is in line with SubGenius teachings that do not demonize non-SubGenii but rather pity them as “Conspiracy dupes.” Burke articulates the larger mission for the comic frame:

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning attain to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy (41).

The reflexive aspect of this generous perspective is a part of Burke’s discussion of satire where he writes “the satirists attacks *in others* with the weaknesses and temptations that are really *within himself*...(49). Burke says this move both “gratifies and punishes the vice” and is a move of “strategic ambiguity” which he compares to the bonfires of Savonarola by which he tried to exorcise his own demons (49). SubGenii practice a similar strategic ambiguity in their occasional combination of satire and venom as occurs in cathartic, satirical “hate-rants.”

In Chapter 13 of *Revelation X*, “Victory Through Hate” SubGenii are encouraged to “UNLEASH YOUR CREHATIVITY” as the “ONE SURE WEAPON in THWARTING the CONSPIRACY.” The mostly satirical nature of the hatred they espouse can be seen in the hyperbolic definition of SubGenius hate:

An *INFINITE* MALICE! A RANCOR THAT *KNOWS NO BOUNDS!!* A LOATHING THAT EXTENDS TO THE VERY END OF ALL KNOWN UNIVERSES! A VENOM AS BLACK AS SPACE ITSELF!!! A MORBID and TRULY *HORRIFIED* REPUGNANCE!! A RADIOACTIVE hate! A BURNING, SCOURING, *ANNIHILATING HATE!!!* A hate that peels paint off walls, makes traffic lights explode, and ruptures sewer lines (148).

The “logic” that follows this definition of this hate concludes in a surprising reversal “so finally, *THERE’S NOTHING TO HATE BUT HATE ITSELF... you disappear into that, you give yourself up to it. You **BECOME the Hate**...leaving boundless love in your heart for all things*” (148). In this satirical, koan-like statement, the desired result is “boundless love” but the catharsis must come first. In *Encounters With Kenneth Burke* Rueckert writes that, in Burke’s writings, “catharsis is central to the theory of symbolic action” (70). For example, in Part III of *Attitudes* Burke discusses the nature of ritual and art’s social function:

the symbolic manipulations of art supply the vents for ‘anti-social’ impulses, taking up the slack, by tragic ambiguity, between the given society’s norms and the individuals necessarily imperfect fit with these norms (189-190).

The exaggerated emotional expression of the SubGenius is shrewdly strategic because it simultaneously provides catharsis while reflexively mocking itself with rabid excess, and its ambiguity lies in the incongruity of humor and hatred or of hatred and church. In his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms”, a key term for our analysis is “perspective by incongruity” that Burke describes as

...a method for gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking.’ That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category... ‘perspectives by incongruity’ do not belong to a cult of virtuosity, but bring us nearest to the simple truth...a methodology of the pun...[that] links by tonal association words hitherto unlinked (*ATH* 308-309).

For example, above we have one of many SubGenius neologisms in which “creativity,” a universally positive expression is combined with “hate,” a universally negative expression (with some typographical emphasis) to make “CREHATIVITY” an incongruous hybrid that arrests our attention and asks us to think more deeply about creativity and emotional motivation.

Such satirical hate-rants satirize, critique and express the frustrations of alienation in an increasingly unequal capitalist economy, and they are directed generally at “the Con” or the conspiracy that forces conformity to alienating work, diminishing leisure and an increasing emphasis on commoditized pre-packaged encounters rather than direct experience. But such critiques are not always welcome. In his discussion of “the didactic” and the “magic of authority,” Burke speculates that there are “channels of education [that]...explicitly discourage the spread” of criticism of the “disorders of capitalism” hence the subversive nature of

strategically ambiguous, comic strategies. In spite of this explicit discouragement, Burke encourages persistence:

Nonetheless, critics must persist in their attempts to spread and perfect a ‘comic’ interpretation of human motives, aware that...the movement towards the humane and civilized is maintained precisely insofar as the astute self-consciousness of comedy is ‘implemented’ by the accumulated body of comic shrewdness (*ATH* 79 note).

Burke’s “Conclusion” to Part I admits, like the Church of the SubGenius, the “subterfuges to which the poet or thinker must resort, as he organizes the complexity of life’s relationships within the limitations imposed by his perspective.” Practical application of rhetoric ever in the fore, Burke hopes he has convinced us that his “comic frame” will be “the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships.” Briefly articulating why the comic frame is the best choice, Burke seems to describe sly SubGenius satire and its ego-checking reflexivity:

the comic frame is charitable...but it is not gullible. It keeps alive to the ways in which people ‘cash in on’ their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes- but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation (106-107).

In Part II “The Curve of History” the chapters most relevant to finding echoes of Burke’s rhetoric in SubGenius satire are chapter 5 “Naïve Capitalism” and chapter 6 “Comic Correctives.” Burke begins “Naïve Capitalism” with a reference to an observation he had sketched out in his introduction about the moral transformation of ambition from being a sin to

avoid into being a salvation to attain. Condensing the process of democratizing ambition, Burke writes:

The people had been trained in a subsistence economy. They asked at most for full bellies and the barest comforts' for further riches they should turn to 'laziness,' art, the rituals and the festivals. This 'immoral' attitude had to be 'educated' out of them, so that they would bring their sturdiest energies to the running of their employers' enterprises (142).

The "'laziness,' art, the rituals and the festivals" are an aspect of Slack and are the preferred activities of SubGenii. Burke's survey of capitalism acknowledges the role of literacy and the technologies of contract and deed in the appropriation of lands that were previously communally owned, such as the 1688 Acts of Enclosure which he deftly connects to the modern concept of corporate personhood by noting the role of the judiciary in both cases and "their helpful decisions on matters of corporate law" (145).

Moreover, Burke observes the homogenizing impact of such economics on the American frontier, writing that wherever there was resistance it "could be obliterated by the unifying devices of abstract finance" which he says acted as "a kind of smear that could be washed over the genius of particular localities" that ultimately obscures "particular characteristics" that might have developed organically as a result of local factors (147). A drive down any interstate can confirm this in nearly every state, and it is this type of normalized, sprawling suburban sameness that is anathema to the SubGenius who calls its culture "pink," a term that is used as a derisive adjective in the lower case, and as a noun in the upper case. References to "Pinks" or "Pink Boys" are sprinkled throughout SubGenius texts and performance and in *The Book of the*

SubGenius one definition is “PINKNESS. A cancer of the imagination, the hatred of the real, the yearning for ‘cuteness,’ the eagerness to obey...”(17).

In chapter 4, “Comic Correctives,” Burke begins by referencing his concept of a “*bondage-freedom ambivalence*” that he explains at the end of chapter 5 “Emergent Collectivism” where he describes

a society where talk of ‘freedom’ is being so steadily ‘cashed in on’ for apologetic purposes...that the individual is a bondsman, who ‘justifies’ himself by paying tribute to the norms of his society. The issue then ceases to be a squabble over ‘freedom vs. bondage’ it becomes a weighing of various frames in which a bondage-freedom ambivalence can express itself (165).

Following this, the first line of chapter 4 provides the essence of the comic corrective and its characteristics. An echo of his concern when he was shouted down as “traitor” at the 1935 American Writer’s Conference, Burke is here attuned to effective propagandistic strategy and the attitudes necessary to persuade. Burke’s propaganda has a teaching purpose and “must be employed as an essentially *comic* notion, containing two-way attributes lacking in the polemical, one-way approaches,” and this comic perspective helps us attain the “*charitable* attitude” necessary for persuasion and cooperation without losing “our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of cashing in” (166).

Ranging from rhetorical strategy to social criticism, Burke further argues that the comic frame of reference “opens up a new field for social criticism,” which is necessary because we have been unconsciously blinded to the “full operation of ‘alienating’ processes” by the traditional approach to persuasion, “the overly *materialistic* coordinates of the polemical-debunking frame” which is less about cooperation and more focused on competition (167). The

target of Burke's comic frame in *Attitudes Toward History* is "the private appropriation of the public domain" (accomplished with good PR and lobbying) and he encourages using the comic frame to analyze such exploitation and "to be on the lookout" for its "subtler ways" (169).

Though not devoid of politics, by comparison, the expressions of the Church of the SubGenius seem far less politically focused, perhaps due to the variety of other topics they elaborately satirize, a valorization of leisure and a general political cynicism. The attitude of the CoSG seems more cynical and politically agnostic than Burke's outlook, though SubGenius rhetorical performance and its targets have many parallels with Burke's rhetorical theory and philosophical concerns.

Perhaps the most important and useful aspect of Burke's comic frame that parallels SubGenius rhetoric is the reflexivity encouraged by the comic frame. Burke refers to it as "a *method of study* (man as eternal journeyman)" which he judges more valuable than "the empty accumulation of facts," the mastery of which brings "power" but lacks the "mature social efficacy" of the comic frame of acceptance. Burke clarifies the nature of this maturity, writing "the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting.*" Rather than promoting passivity, the goal is "*maximum consciousness*" for both the satirist and the audience (171).

The comic frame sees human life as a process, "a project in 'composition'...Composition, translation, also 'revision,'" making this frame a tool for promoting evolution. Burke's comic frame of acceptance holds further promise for examination of SubGenius rhetoric in that "it might give a man an attitude that increased his spiritual wealth, by making even bad books and trivial remarks legitimate objects of study" and by giving "important cues for the composition of one's life, which demands accommodation to the

structure of others' lives" (173-174). This accommodation is not a passive adaptation to "the ravages of boredom and inanition that go with the 'alienations' of contemporary society" but rather a strategy for "helping to produce a state of affairs whereby these rigors may abate" (175).

Ruckert argues for the perennial relevance of Burke's faming because "there has never been a time, nor is it likely there will ever be one, in which we do not need and cannot use the comic frame and comic correctives Burke provides" in *Attitudes* (36). Perhaps it was his use of a comic perspective and a reflexive attitude that helped him wade through the resistance he encountered for his unorthodox thinking and method. Rueckert encapsulates Burke's struggle in *Encounters*:

In a culture dominated and almost suffocated by trivia, and in a discipline (the study of literature) devoted to trivia in a kind of monumental way, Burke, true to his idiosyncratic and philosophical bent, went his own way...in developing his theory of symbolic action and the methodology to apply it, he bewildered and offended many of his fellow workers in this most conservative of professions (37).

"Ranging" is the word Rueckert uses to describe Burke's thinking, "one of the most characteristic actions" of his mind which he saw as a matter of "scope" or "thoroughness" but it is a "text-centered" ranging that constantly connects and interweaves, a naturally intertextual mind. Not far removed from the culture jamming satirical expressions of the Church of the SubGenius, Rueckert describes Burke's creative expression that examines itself while simultaneously pulling the chair from under the "overly serious" and delivering aphoristic insight.

Burke the poet is always counter-stating, counter-signing, against the solemnities of his system, parodying the self that built the system, picking away at the overly serious dialectician, reducing the logologer of jingles, pushing the divine comedy on over into farce, and returning again and again to the ironic, often comic voice of aphorist and the small, often trivial concerns of daily life. The most serious truths can be coached into jokes (Rueckert 26).

The “serious truths” that most concern Burke are generally the peaceful resolution of conflict via the comic and more specifically, the survival of our species in the nuclear age, but as we have seen Burke is also concerned with the more immediate socioeconomics of life.

Finally, in Part III of *Attitudes* “Analysis of Symbolic Structure,” we will focus on the first chapter “General Nature of Ritual” where Burke explores the concept of symbolic tinkering and the potential for the “spiritual currency” of a complex symbol system to be hijacked by a small group who would inordinately profit thereby as we have discussed in Burke’s “banking” metaphor above. Here Burke emphasizes practical application when he uses the phrase “the necessity of symbolic tinkering,” which he writes would be needed “even in the ‘best possible of worlds’” (*ATH* 179).

Burke’s opening lines to “Ritual” encourage us to compose a symbolic synthesis that could serve as one description of the Church of the SubGenius: “a vast symbolic synthesis, a rationale of imaginative and conceptual imagery that ‘locates’ the various aspects of experience” (179). Part of composing that symbolic synthesis for the SubGenius might include the creation of a character for performance in Church events thus adding to their already plural sub-identities that must be integrated according to Burke:

For various reasons, one has many disparate moods and attitudes. These may be called sub-identities, subpersonalities, ‘voices.’ And the poet seeks to build the symbolic superstructure that put them together into a comprehensive ‘super-personality’ ...[from] a disparate world that must be ritualistically integrated (184).

Some critics might object, but the creative expressions of SubGenii individually and collectively could be considered art, and indeed there have been SubGenius art shows in Dallas, New York and Amsterdam. The Church of the SubGenius is “a vast symbolic synthesis” like a work of art “summing up a myriad of social and personal factors at once, an analysis of it necessarily radiates in all directions at once” (199). Burke’s ranging mind is an ideal guide through such radiations.

Burke’s “Flowerishes”

Before we leave our brief review of Burke’s thought in *Attitudes* and its connections to SubGenius rhetoirc, a quick look at Burke’s visual play with words will reveal another connection with SubGenius practice and highlight the creativity of Burke’s “ranging” intellect. Though a self-described “word man” Kenneth Burke did not feel obligated to remain within the limits of rectilinear symbolic expression and his “Flowerishes” are described by Rueckert as a key to his intelligence, that “taken as a whole, [they] represent the essential ironic nature of Burke’s mind, critical perspective, and final vision” (82). Below, we will make a brief examination of his aphoristic visual play with words that are akin to the proverb-laden collages of the Church of the SubGenius.

In *Encounters with Kenneth Burke* Rueckert tells us that Burke was always “something of a comedian” and notes that his aphoristic designs “bear a lot of analysis” because they “all

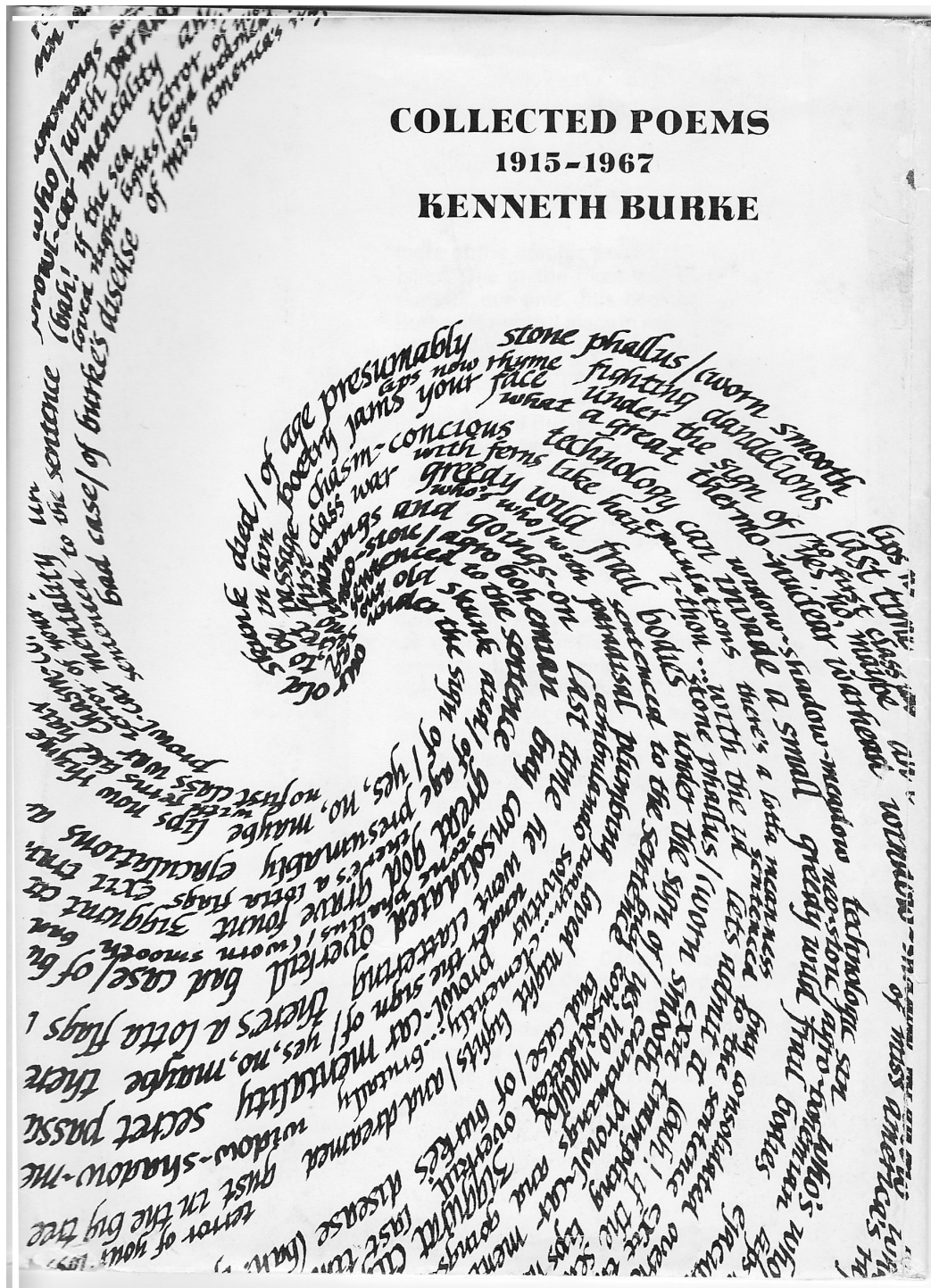
contain a form of perspectival wisdom” and they also have the effect of evoking “a change of perspective, by making you look at something from a sudden new angle of vision” (5-6).

Additionally, in *Counter-Statement* Burke notes that “as a rule the appeal of aphorism is intrinsic; that is, it satisfies without being functionally related to the context” (34), so anyone can enjoy the clever ambiguity of “DOWN with sedition, UP with sedation” on the cover of his *Collected Poems* though the phrase is not an expression of the content of the collection.

Such creative play with alphabetic code or the simple collaging of iconic images is more potent and social than we might suspect. In *What do pictures want?* Mitchell reinforces Debord’s Thesis 4 observation that the spectacle is “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” Without using the now common phrase “viral image” Mitchell nevertheless describes images in viral terms as a living and active force that “coexist with their human host.” Mitchell describes images as deeply influential, “They change the way we think and see and dream. They refunction our memories and imaginations, bringing new criteria and new desires into the world...The life of images is not a private or individual matter. It is a *social* life” (92-93). While Burke’s “Flowerishes” involve text, the lack of traditional rectilinear formatting and the variety of (hand drawn!) fonts combine to make the page of text a kind of gestalt image. If we look into the vortex of words we may or may not remember a phrase, but the image of a spiral, or perhaps of a cresting wave, will continue to live in our imagination.

The image below, the cover of Burke’s *Collected Poems*, features a spiral of words. Is it a cresting alphabetic wave or a sucking maelstrom of language? Or maybe the form is a hypnotic spiral, suggesting our intoxication with the *pharmakon* and the sense of power it gives. On the cover and the final, unnumbered pages of *Collected Poems* there are several collages of words and phrases in a variety of hand-written fonts. Each page demands that the reader re-orient his

perspective by following a spiral of woven words or turning the page to read a passage or phrase written in a non-rectilinear direction – and in this way, gets us to physically re-enact Burke’s exploration of multiple perspectives.



The cover presents us with a whirlpool of words that simultaneously seduce and frustrate. Beginning from the center, we can read several thought-provoking lines, some of which repeat throughout the clockwise spiral. I have underlined phrases for additional comment or potential connection to SubGenius expressions or concerns.

our old skunk died / of age presumably stone phallus / worn smooth

to be in hvn poetry jams your face under the sign of / yes, no, maybe

widow-shadow-meadow

secret passsage chasm-conscious technology can invade a small

neo-stoic agro-bohemian

no first class war with ferns like hair i-thou...with the id let's admit it

greedy wild, frail bodies under the sign of / yes, no, maybe

what a great thermonuclear warhead

ejaculations there's a lotta meanness buy consolodated overkill

sentenced to the sentence bad case of / burke's disease

who's who with paradisal plumbing loved night lights / and dreamed

terror of your loss gust in the big tree

twain...clemently...brutally widow-shadow-me

ambulando solvitur prowl-cat mentality secret passage

That “poetry” does something as rough as “jam your face” is an unexpected juxtaposition, an example of Burke’s concept of “perspective by incongruity.”

The “sign of / yes, no, maybe” is also perspective by incongruity since we expect a “sign” to have a single meaning, not a conflicting series of possibilities. This perspective is meant to “*make one at home* in the complexities of relativism” as he explains in his Pivotal Terms (229).

The “maybe” part of the equation is an expression of a key SubGenius tenet, best articulated by R. A. Wilson and eventually manifest in his Maybe Logic Academy where Ivan Stang taught the first courses on the Church of the SubGenius (Timeline).

Burke’s phrase “neo-stoic agro-bohemian” is a self-authorized classification that seems to encapsulate his philosophy and life from Greenwich Village to rural Andover. We are reminded of Eisenhower’s famous (yet to happen) speech warning about the “military-industrial complex” with Burke’s Flowerish “buy consolodated overkill.” The restrictions of alphabetic expression are teased out in “sentenced to the sentence” but “ambulando solvitur” and “prowl-cat mentality” both pay tribute to the ranging mind with the keen hunter’s eye in whose perigrinations can be found solutions.

creative reflections, here playing on the word “flourish” or to be in a state of blooming and “flower” the end result of that state, a beautiful evanescent bloom.

Burke’s ironic statement “DOWN with sedition, UP with sedation” might have been inspired by his work with Colonel Woods “researching drugs and drug use” at the Bureau of Social Hygiene in New York from 1928 to the mid 1930s (Hawhee 6). This Flowerish also reminds of chapter 15 in Huxley’s *Brave New World* where the riot of Deltas was quelled with “Synthetic Anti-Riot Speech Number Two (Medium Strength)” and huge clouds of vaporized soma. Don’t start a revolution just “ask your doctor” if this sedative is right for you.

Known for his pioneering thinking, some of Burke’s observations and aphorisms seem eerily prescient as with “spy on thyself” which reminds us, in our digital context, that we are not only monitored by agencies like the NSA but we also provide copious personal information via social media, effectively revealing with a click what a “spy” might work months or years to discover. The use of the Elizabethan pronoun “thyself” evokes that sense of authority associated with the King James Bible, an authority that invites obeisance and conformity. Subtly we are trained to monitor ourselves, not just to restrain obvious anti-social behavior, but to conform to a galaxy of minutia (varying by context) so as to stay in the good graces of employers and other authorities. There is no need for a panopticon when self-policing is a conditioned response.

Of the various aspects of life that are policed, few are more widely monitored and controlled than the use of time. This “time management” is a central concern of the Church of the SubGenius whose logo of a dagger-speared flying clock translates to “killing time control,” of rejecting the relentless pressure to work and meet endless deadlines, but it is not a destructive rejection. Rather it is a move to gain some “Slack,” to create a space (perhaps a T.A.Z.?) where there is leisure for creative play and where time can seem to slow as we lose ourselves in such

basic human joys, long abandoned in our past as we worked hard to “grow up” and be an “adult.” When Burke’s aphorism asks “Which does the clock strike: ‘Memento Mori’ or ‘If you don’t hurry you’ll be late to work’?” he playfully reminds us of the uncertainty and brevity of life while challenging us to consider the relative triviality of our urgently scheduled, clock-driven priorities.

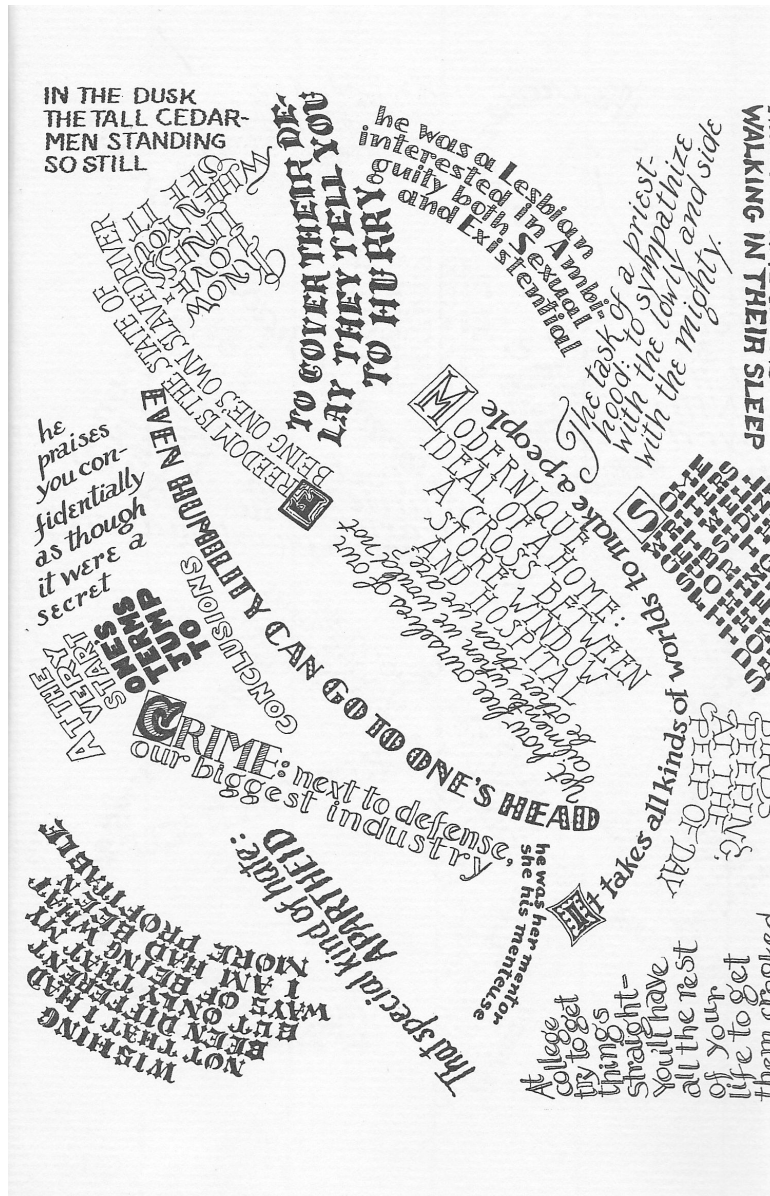


“Killing Time Control” image

(Archive)

or is that a definition of the University?” Here Burke seems to accept the territorial concerns that arise in an academic setting but then he asks us whether this territoriality isn’t ultimately a limitation or restriction on the University.

The necessities of earning a living and a disregard for the environment are captured in the aphorism “He left the Forestry conservation service for a better paying job in a Lumber mill,” while Burke’s reflexive statement “We avoid being stupid like other people by being stupid in ways of our own” is a sentiment repeated throughout SubGenius performance. A final aphorism to consider in this collage is “WELCOME YOU LOUSE, TO REALITY HOUSE” a slogan that is seemingly predictive of the “reality TV” industry, and the character traits that it celebrates and rewards. The slogan could also reference the movement from parasite to self-sustainer or it could be suggesting we reflect on our insignificance and the potential that we may be nothing more than parasites on some vast unknown being.



In the Flowerishes above, we find several interesting proverbs that have a prescience and encourage reflection and have potential connection to SubGenius values and expression. The Flowerish “he was a Lesbian interested in Ambiguity both Sexual and Existential” echoes SubGenius emphasis on deliberately ambiguous expression while reminding us that today’s transgender movement is not so new. All caps are used in the Flowerish “FREEDOM IS THE STATE OF BEING ONE’S OWN SLAVEDRIVER” is certainly in line with SubGenius

emphasis on Slack, the leisure for “unproductive” creative play and it is an echo of *Walden and* Thoreau’s warning that “worst of all [is] when you are the slave-driver of yourself.” Burke’s Flowerishes bloom fresh in today’s headlines, particularly “CRIME: next to defense, our biggest industry” which mirrors recent awareness of police militarization as well as the existence of for-profit prisons.

While some Flowerishes are political in nature, others are condensations or pre-cursors to some of his central concepts. “AT THE VERY START ONE’S TERMS JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS” is a succinct aphoristic encapsulation of his concept of “terministic screens.” Finally, the Flowerish that represents a sentiment that Ivan Stang would likely share but that also emphasizes the crucial priority of being true to one’s own particular genius in a world bent on systematic standardization: “WISHING NOT THAT I HAD BEEN DIFFERENT BUT ONLY THAT MY WAYS OF BEING WHAT I AM HAD BEEN MORE PROFITABLE”

In the Flowerish **“transforming chaos into ordure”** Burke seems to tap into the Discordian values and approach of the SubGenii who are not only skeptical of order in terms of its inherent limitations on creative expression and experimentation but also because of the tendency of order to accrue to itself increasing order, control, and fixity – the reverse of a living, dynamic system, ordure, an excretion of technology. Russian Yevgeny Zamyatin, author of the seminal 1922 dystopia *We*, articulated this common problem with a different vivid metaphor in his essay “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters”:

When the flaming, seething sphere (in science, religion, social life, art) cools, the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma – a rigid, ossified motionless crust. Dogmatization in science, religion, social life or art is the entropy of thought. What has become dogma no longer burns; it only gives warmth – it is tepid, it is cool.

However, sharing a strategic ambiguity with the Church of the SubGenius, Burke’s aphorism “transforming chaos into ordure” might alternately signify the value of transforming chaos into a kind of order that is rich with potential, like a fertilizing manure. Such ambiguous aphorisms, rich with meaning, make for a kind of Western koan forcing the mind to stop with surprise and think in new ways.

A central SubGenius slogan is “Science does not remove the fear of the gods” a playful nod at their Lovecraft-influenced mythos but also a challenge to a scientific hubris reckless of consequence. Perhaps playing with FDR’s famous inspirational line but in reverse, “ALL WE NEED FEAR IS LACK OF FEAR ITSELF” reminds us that it might be wise to tread with some trepidation as we hurtle into new technological realms without having solved some of our more basic and dangerous problems. One such problem might be the invention of weapons of mass

destruction that could end up harming us in unexpected ways as expressed in the Flowerish “God save us from the day when the twister hits the bacteriological Laboratory.” And with climate change an increasing part of our experience, again Burke is as relevant in the 21st Century as he was in the 20th.

His Flowerish “A soft spoken Cross-burning southerner” certainly was a real part of his own day, even after the advances of the Civil Rights era, the phrase remains sadly relevant with the disturbing rise of White Nationalism, part of a 56% increase in the number of hate groups since 2000 as documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC website).

Though deeply concerned with sociopolitical issues and the future of humanity, Burke tried to exercise the reflexivity inherent in his comic frame with observations about his own shortcomings as in the Flowerish “RUSTY WITH IRONY” a punning, play on words with sonic suggestions, a squeaking hinge perhaps, the sound of encrustation and creeping rigidity? Or is this another expression of self-doubt, like “WAITING WITH DOG EYES TO BE SHOWN THE DOOR?”

Though not as artful or poetic as his Flowerishes, with his emphasis on embodiment, Burke might understand the chthonic chaos of this SubGenius collage when he writes, “In particular, the vastly non-sensual world of technology, accountancy, and abstraction necessary to operate the modern industrial plant would seem to make for compensatory sensuality” (*ATH* 218). While we no longer work in industrial plants, our labyrinth of cubicles offers a similarly non-sensual world that begs for sensual compensations. The SubGenius collage below simultaneously celebrates the earthier functions of the body while mocking hyperbolic commercialism and self-righteousness without forgetting to satirize itself with a concluding come on to “turn bullshit into gold!!”

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EXCREMEDITATION

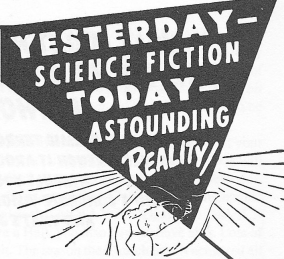
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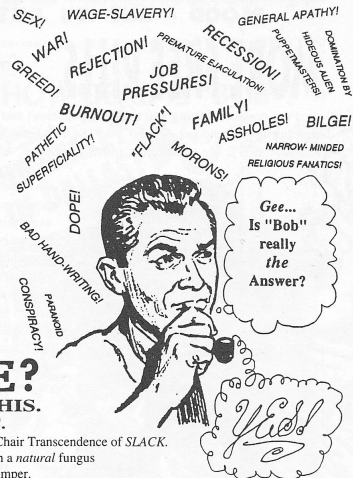
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xix



Chapter 5

Methods: categorized discourse, rhetorical analysis & survey

This chapter is a brief overview of my analytical methods along with some articulation of the philosophies that shape my approach and why they are especially appropriate for the unique task of analyzing SubGenius rhetoric for traces of Burke's comic frame. In the context of our new digital technologies, radical shifts in traditional intellectual practice will be necessary if the academy is to remain a vital and relevant resource in the 21st Century - the mechanical production of text is no longer sufficient to effectively navigate the vast vortex of information and opportunity that now swirls around us.

As noted in the abstract, this essay will examine topically categorized excerpts from selected SubGenius publications to highlight the many surprising parallels between Burke's comic frame rhetoric and SubGenius creative expression, and to note three specific examples of the ripples of their rhetorical influence in the public arena, demonstrating the power of Burke's theory in practice. I do not claim that Rev. Stang or participants in the Church of the SubGenius are consciously and deliberately deploying Burke's rhetoric. Instead, it has been intriguing to discover the many ways that SubGenius rhetoric and philosophical concerns organically coincide with Burke's own. SubGeniis seem to instinctively practice comic frame rhetoric and symbolic tinkering without any knowledge of Kenneth Burke or his rhetorical theory.

These spontaneous connections between Burke's rhetoric and SubGenius expression are surprising perhaps because it initially seems counterintuitive to find intelligence, sophistication

and insight in a fake “church” expressed as a semi-chaotic creative performance collage designed to satirize revered institutions, human hubris and cultural dysfunctions. Although such satire is not new, as I hope to demonstrate, SubGenius rhetorical performance is more intelligent, insightful, and influential than it first appears.

The SubGenius expressions I will examine most particularly will be transcriptions from the *Hour of Slack* radio broadcast and selections from *Revelation X*, as well as selections of primary source SubGenius archival material (imagic, alphabetic and sonic). Burke’s concepts of man as the “symbol using animal” and “language as symbolic action” will be my central lens for analysis with a specific focus on his 1937 work *Attitudes Toward History* and his concepts of the “comic frame” and “the necessity of symbolic tinkering.” Occasionally I will also briefly reference some of his other works, most particularly *Language as Symbolic Action* and *Counter-Statement*. My secondary sources focus mostly on SubGenius expression, partly guided by those writers invoked by Carole Cusack in her discussion of the church in *Invented Religions*. However I also include several Burke experts that best clarify his ideas, particularly as they relate to the unique rhetoric of the Church of the SubGenius.

Eschewing the mechanical umbilical

Taking a cue from Sandra Harding’s “standpoint theory” of epistemology, to strengthen the objectivity of my approach, I would like to situate myself and the style of this essay with a few observations about the impact of technology on academic discourse that affirms Burke’s priority of forging a more effective rhetoric for civic engagement.

Robert Frodeman, Director of the Center for the Study of Interdisciplinarity at the University of North Texas and Editor in Chief of the *Oxford of Interdisciplinarity* speaking at the University of Richmond’s 2010 Crimmel Colloquium and said that Liberal Arts Education

should be free of dogma, promoting “unrestricted examination.” Frodeman argues that the current rate of academic knowledge production is unsustainable: 1 million articles per year, 7 million blogs, 3000 books per day cause a “loss of a sense of the whole.” In a 2009 article “De-Disciplining the Humanities,” co-written with Jennifer Rowland, they suggest that the academy has become “...a professional chattering class, armored with shibboleths, disdainful of getting our hands dirty, pursuing infinite arguments set in language impenetrable to outsiders” (1).

While Burke’s rhetoric was “impenetrable” to some of his peers, it was not because it was clothed in the “priestly mystifications” of a disciplinary jargon, but rather because the combination of original thinking and ranging/radiating structure presented an unwanted challenge for readers with standardized expectations. Generally speaking, Burke’s language is fairly plain considering the complexity of his thought and when he does use jargon, often it is terminology of his own invention. His rhetorical suggestions that caused such furor at the 1935 Writer’s Convention set his tone: socially progressive rhetoric should be inclusive, engaged and effective for a broader audience instead of a studied “dedication to private language games among initiates” as Frodeman and Rowland describe it (6). Decrying such exclusive practice, they seem to describe Burke when they contrast today’s humanities that has “taken on the mode of scientists” with the more holistic humanities of the past:

The humanities today operate at a level of abstraction and supposed ‘rigor’ that precludes interactions with non-specialists. To be a humanist once meant to take a wide compass—to be inspired generalists providing accounts of the whole of human experience (6).

The advantages of specialization are obvious, but without the balance offered by more encompassing perspectives, including “non-specialists,” we arrive at the kind of knowledge

represented by the Jainist story of the blind men separately trying to describe an elephant, each mistaking his part for the whole.

Burke is one of those “inspired generalists” who devised holistic systems for interpreting human symbolic exchange. Considering the original nature and wide range of his thought, there are innumerable writers and texts I could reference in this discussion, and no doubt many readers will hope for, but not find, their own “essential” source cited in this discussion. However such exhaustive forays would risk distraction from the central target of my rhetorical analysis devolving into the kind of hyper-referential academic showmanship Burke seems to disparage.

Writing in *Attitudes Toward History* he characterizes such intellectual practices, noting that

mastery of this sort (where, if ‘Knowledge is power,’ people ‘get power’ vicariously by gaining possession of its ‘insignia,’ accumulated facts) may somewhat patch up a wounded psyche; but a more adventurous equipment is required if one is to have a private possession marked by mature social efficacy (170-171).

The pressure to reject the “adventurous equipment” of directly interpreting primary sources and instead build a discussion solely on a lengthy chain of secondary references is satirized in E. M. Forster’s prescient 1909 story “The Machine Stops.”

‘Beware of first-hand ideas!’ exclaimed one of the most advanced [lecturers] ‘First-hand ideas do not really exist....Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element—direct observation....And in time’--his voice rose—‘there will come a generation that had got beyond facts, beyond impressions, *a generation absolutely*

colourless, a generation seraphically free from taint of personality' (16 italics mine).

In addition to a critique of conformity thinking, the passage represents the reason that Burke is an ideal rhetorician to study SubGenius expression: both Burke and the Church of the SubGenius practice and promote the exact opposite of such mechanized thinking: colorful, creative expression of original observation from a genuine personality. This kind of expression is increasingly discouraged, difficult and alien as our various technologies homogenize our experience, expectations and expression. I am reminded of Jacques Ellul's 1963 warning that technology is "the prime mover of all the rest, in spite of any appearance to the contrary and in spite of human pride, which pretends that man's philosophical theories are still determining influences" (*Technological Society* 133).

While we may not agree with Ellul's totalizing determinism, the ancient and ongoing impact of technology on human evolution has led to its current dominance. This is an undeniable fact of daily experience for most of the world and, as such, has become naturalized, increasingly seen as inevitable and necessary. Whether we automatically follow dusty dull traditions or allow our Smartphone to organize our day, the technology we use directly shapes and limits our experience. And what we notice least of all is the growing number of systems for the regimentation of human thinking, behavior and expression that are natural extensions of the technology of the phonetic alphabet but which can cripple us unawares.

Alphabetic Awareness

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan observes that the alphabet, one of the early technologies to profoundly shape the human mind and behavior, empowers us tremendously

while simultaneously and invisibly trapping our minds within its narrow, segmented sequentiality and homogenizing our thinking in the process (121-123). The impact of this on academic expression is that it results in what McLuhan describes as “umbilical discourse” where all ideas must be traced back to the source along a single path, thus discouraging interdisciplinary observations and the introduction of new voices to the conversation. This apt phrase comes from his audio collage adaptation of his book *The Medium is the Massage* in which he also asserts “education must shift from instruction, from the imposing of stencils on brain pans as it were, to discovery, to probing and exploring and to the recognition of the language of forms” (side B 19:45-19:55).

Such intellectual stencil expectations and discouragement of probing exploration were familiar to Kenneth Burke whose unorthodox methods evoked dismissive annoyance from many academics who complained about his “unsystematic” approach, perhaps signaling their own inability to follow thinking that does not fit precisely within their inherited orthodox stencil. A natural response perhaps, but as we hurtle into the 21st Century, it behooves us to remember Emerson’s steam-era warning to the graduates of Cambridge, “Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments.” When I cling to my stencils, my familiar frames of thinking and expression, I am subdued by the very tools that once empowered my discourse but that have now become blinders through overuse.

Dithering Discourse

For example, rather than dismiss it for not fitting our traditional academic stencil, we might wonder, can something as apparently chaotically silly as the Church of the SubGenius actually qualify as a kind of discourse? James Paul Gee, in *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, suggests a definition of “Discourse with a capital ‘D’”

...distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities (155).

While some SubGenius activities are more “socially recognizable” than others, Gee’s multilayered concept describes them accurately so we will use this specific definition of Discourse. However, later in *Social Linguistics* Gee complicates this by slightly revising his wording so that “socially recognizable” becomes “socially accepted,” a phrase which does not always apply to the Church of the SubGenius. Additionally, he makes five points about rhetoric, one of which seems an ill-fit for the CoSG. Gee claims that “discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny” which may be true of many forms of discourse, especially authoritative discourse, but resistance does not accurately describe the Church of the SubGenius which practices a self-satirical reflexivity that Burke espouses as both the motivation and result of his comic frame.

For the purposes of our examination, we will operate with Gee’s definition of Discourse above.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Naturally, SubGenius publications and Burke’s writings are central primary sources for this essay, but it is also supported by a variety of additional primary source materials: four DVDs of SubGenius archival information, a 50-minute personal interview with Doug Smith (Stang), email and Facebook chat correspondences with Smith and Steve Wilcox (Drummond), selected transcriptions of several episodes of the *Hour of Slack*, and the data collected from the “SubGenius *Hour of Slack* listener survey”.

The central secondary source featured is chapter 4 of Carole Cusack's study *Invented Religions*, "The Church of the SubGenius: Science Fiction Mythos, Culture Jamming and the Sacredness of Slack," the references of which guide some of my other secondary source citations.

Since radio broadcast is one of their most prolific productions, I have selected excerpts primarily from the *Hour of Slack* radio show and *Revelation X*, though a few additional examples may be gathered from other SubGenius creations. These selections are categorized and examined for echoes of Burke's comic frame and symbolic tinkering.

Topical Categorization of Excerpts

Though I will be applying Burke's theory to SubGenius rhetoric throughout the essay, chapter 7 is specifically devoted to application of Burke's rhetorical theory to SubGenius expression. It is structured according to topics satirized in SubGenius rhetoric and concludes with passages that demonstrate the reflexive comic perspective Burke recommends in *Attitudes*. Like a Venn diagram, some of the selected passages will fit more than one of the five categories. As the list is not exhaustive, other categories not listed might also apply and could be explored in future studies. The categories that structure chapter 7 are:

- Religion/Cults/Authority
- Economics/Consumerism
- Conspiracy
- Eschatology
- Reflexivity

Online Survey

In addition to text, audio and image analysis, to expand our understanding of the size and impact of the Church of the SubGenius we have deployed a basic 10-question online survey of listeners to *Hour of Slack*. The survey collected 207 responses which were compiled in text and

chart form by SurveyMonkey. From the results we can gain additional insight into the impact of the CoSG and possibly the resonance of its Burkean rhetorical performance. The detailed results are discussed in more specific detail in the next chapter and the complete results are in Appendix B.

Burkean/SubGenius Approach

Though not without traditional arrangement, this essay may take the more “ranging” approach of Burke in making its observations and, in line with SubGenius satire, may make *seemingly* random connections that help bring some insight. Discussing a reviewer’s balking at his copious footnotes, Burke described his own method of composition thus:

the material ‘radiated’ in various directions, and these ‘radiations’ could not have been traced any other way...The problem of ‘radiations’ forced us to consider repeatedly the labyrinthine way in which one term involves others...all those side routes have their ways of connecting with one another, in the labyrinthine city of a terminology (*ATH* 1955 Introduction vi).

Burke’s ranging and radiating through the labyrinth of language might at first seem aimless, suspiciously non-linear and thus inherently unreliable or insufficiently rigorous. However the multiplicity of non-linear intertextual connections of the Web force us to reconsider what Jacques Attali calls “a fundamental bias in our civilization” in his insightful reflection *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*. Noting the “ancient ubiquity of the labyrinth” Attali wonders at our “omission” of this theme considering its role in education, initiation and apprenticeship. Reflecting broadly on the history of education, Attali notes a change in the process and meaning of learning:

For most of human history, education and initiation were inseparably joined. Apprenticeship was naturally presented as a labyrinthine passage, with ordeals, masks, and menaces....much later, learning acquired a different meaning, becoming an accumulation of demystified knowledge...this learning followed a rectilinear path from ignorance to knowledge...but in reality, real knowledge remained labyrinthine, its acquisition complex and tortuous (xxii, 65).

Attali's observation about the lengthy and non-linear process of pre-industrial education reminds us that deeply engaged learning may not always follow our "typographic conditioning in patterns of lineal uniformity and fragmented repeatability" – the way may be multicursal and labyrinthine (McLuhan 308). With this in mind, it is my hope that readers will not be disoriented should the discussion occasionally stray from the rectilinear for occasional explorations into the labyrinth of "Bob" and its connections to the even more elaborate labyrinth of Burke.



Chapter 6

Estimating the “congregation” & impact of the Church of the SubGenius

The primary focus of this essay is an exploration of Burke’s rhetoric in SubGenius communication, but a secondary purpose is an attempt to grasp the size of the SubGenius audience. When attempting to determine the size of a group or estimate its cultural impact we often visualize the information in terms of a tree with roots penetrating deep into the ground, limbs and articulated branches reaching to the sky, populated with names of individuals or groups. For our attempt to estimate the congregation and impact of the Church of the SubGenius, another model may be more apt.

The model of a rhizomic form of becoming as described by Deleuze & Guttari in *A Thousand Plateaus* may be more in line with the form of the CoSG making its organization, size and history difficult to comprehend via arborescent models of thinking. The CoSG does not have deep roots and it has no obvious branches, but rather it is rhizomic, spreading horizontally across our culture, placing random, satirical roots and making connections as it goes. Equally difficult to define are SubGenius participants and their creations which, like the sorcerers in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “have always held an anomalous position at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages” (246).

The exact membership of the Church of the SubGenius, if “member” strictly refers to those who have paid their yearly “dues” or those who have paid their \$35 for the SubGenius “Salvation/Membership/ Ordainment” package, is probably the lowest estimate of size and

fluctuates from year to year. However, whatever the number of “paid-up” members, the actual congregation is likely to be larger because

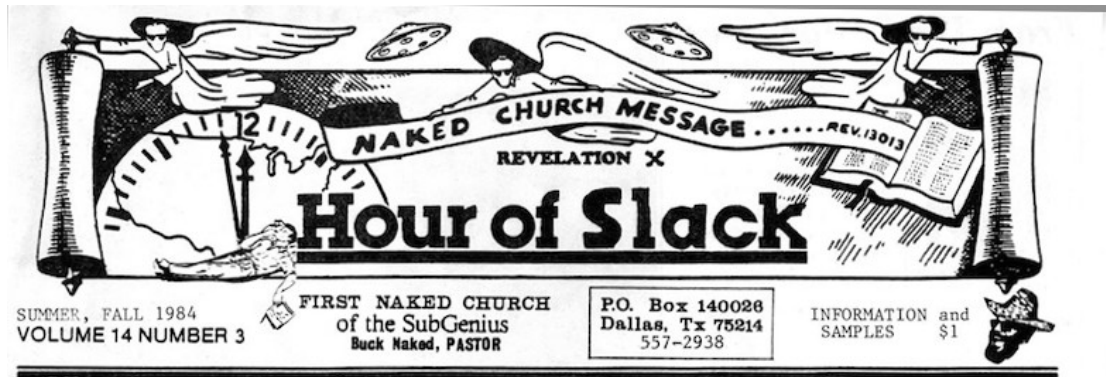
...by definition **true SubGenii are not ‘Joiners.’** They’re rightfully suspicious of herds. They don’t want to be ‘members’ of any organization. It’s a miracle that we’ve gotten *this* far. Between the cult’s tendency towards secrecy and the one Law that the laws change from minute to minute, it’s not surprising that there’s no man-on-the-street soliciting and proselytizing (*Book 17*).

Perhaps due to the chaos-oriented influence of Discordianism or to philosophical opposition to institution and regimentation, the number of participants is difficult to gage. Stang has some rough figures on “dues paying members” and ordained ministers but the openness of the CoSG allows many to participate without paying for membership.

The SubG Timeline and *Hour of Slack* episodes indicate several points of popular culture connection such as their 1991 MTV ad and regular collaborations with members of groundbreaking bands like DEVO, Negativland and GWAR. There were also early positive responses to their pamphlet and other texts resulting in contact from R. Crumb and Merry Prankster Ken Kesey who became a Church of the SubGenius member, got ordained and performed at least once as “Rev. Hardly Noticed” (Timeline).

In *Hour of Slack* #91 (re-run on episode # 1043) Rev. Stang interviews counterculture writer Robert Anton Wilson, a SubGenius Pope most known for his conspiracy-oriented fictional trilogy *Illuminatus!* published in 1975 with Robert Shea. This episode has been downloaded 3783 times as of 08/16/14. *Illuminatus!* was eventually adapted for the stage and performed in an 8-hour show at the London National Theater in 1977 (National Theater). Another notable

interviewee on *Hour of Slack* is Paul Krassner, founder of *The Realist* magazine, featured in episode #1016 that has been downloaded 2779 times as of 08/16/14. We will discuss audio download numbers more specifically below, but to get the best idea of the size of the SubGenius congregation and the cultural impact of the CoSG we will examine a variety of measures including web searches, social media analysis and an online listener survey.



In McLeod's brief treatment of the Church of the SubGenius, he argues that it is Stang's weekly radio program *Hour of Slack* that was the catalyst that generated significant interest on college campuses at the time.

This 'religion' found an enthusiastic audience on university campuses during the 1980's, especially after college radio stations began airing Stang's syndicated weekly radio show, *Hour of Slack* (245).

Named after Rev. Buck Naked's 1984 "Naked Church" newsletter, *The Hour of Slack*, is the most prolific of SubGenius productions (not counting images) with over 1,460 live broadcasts beginning in October 1985 on KNON Dallas and continuing today in Cleveland on WCSB, Cleveland State's student-run radio station. Rev. Ivan Stang is usually the central host of the show along with Dr. Hal or Princess Wei, Stang's wife. Along with founding SubGenius Philo Drummond, Dr. Hal has been a long-time creative participant in the Church of the SubGenius

and the *Hour of Slack* regularly offering relevant, factual academic or literary connections and other educated references, often in a mock professorial tone.

The “prescripture” verse posted on the *Hour of Slack* website: “I came not to bring peace, but an obnoxious radio show.”-- J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs, 1956-ecclesiastes 6:14” provides an early hint of the reflexive nature of Burke’s comic frame. *Hour of Slack* is performed primarily for fun and the promotion of spontaneous creativity. In an email interview, Stang reflects on his influences and the chance event that got him involved in radio:

I was a HUGE fan of The Firesign Theatre. I never really thought about radio until Puzzling Evidence and I, and LIES, got invited to a KPFA Berkeley show by Bob Nelson in June 1982. After I went back to Texas, Puzzling, LIES, and Dr. Hal kept coming back and it turned into a SubG show. I used their tapes on Media Barrages until a community station in Dallas invited me to do a show. So by then I had several years' worth of material to work with. Also back then I allowed many visitors and we had frequent guests on the show (Stang email).

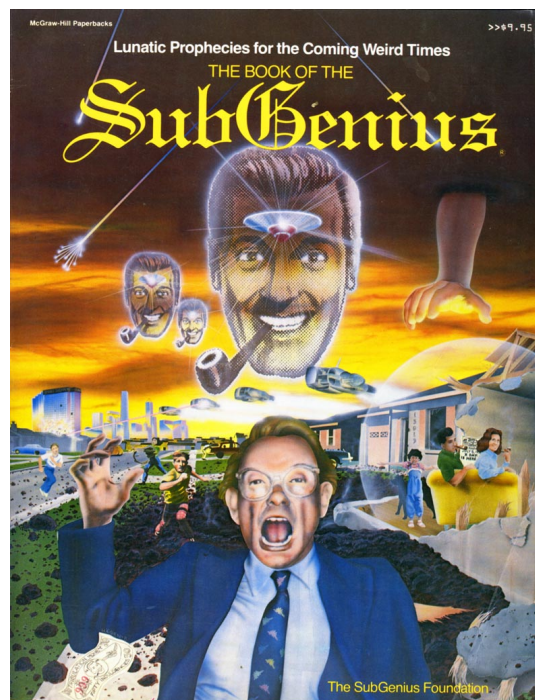
Another central and continuing creative inspiration for Stang is Steve Wilcox, known by his CoSG name Philo Drummond who has helped compose SubGenius books, arrange art shows and who hosts his own radio show *Puzzling Evidence*, collaborating weekly with Stang in what Drummond refers to as “a real cult” (FB chat).



In addition to the weekly broadcast of *Hour of Slack*, the Church of the SubGenius has hosted “weekly online Devivals on Internet Relay Chat” since 1996 and the CoSG has offered other online chat spaces almost since it was first mentioned on a Usenet discussion forum in 1981, later that same year word about the Church of the SubGenius went out on the broader Internet (Timeline). Now they have an official website at subgenius.com and according to an Alexa Analytics basic Search Engine Optimization (SEO) audit of 985 “onsite pages” and 621 links to pages offsite subgenius.com held a high global rank of 1,187,176 out 1 billion websites worldwide but a less impressive rank of 301,513 out of a half million websites in the U.S. (Alexa).

The SubGenius website features a vast labyrinth of free images and audio as well as SubGenius related products from a variety of online stores featuring their foundational Pamphlets #1 & #2, online versions of the *Stark Fist* SubGenius ‘zine, stickers, hats, pins and other swag as well as some of the five books published by Ivan Stang and the SubGenius Foundation:

- 1983 Simon & Schuster published *The Book of the SubGenius*
- 1988 Simon & Schuster published *High Weirdness by Mail*
- 1990 Simon & Schuster published *Three-Fisted Tales of “Bob”*
- 1994 Avalon published *Revelation X*
- 2006 Avalon published *The Bobliographon* – now out of print



The website also features *Hour of Slack* episodes available via CD subscription as well as several *Hour of Slack* sampler CDs, 11 music CDs, 7 media barrage CDs, 7 Devival CDs and 12 DVD productions along with innumerable other images, audio, video and material objects created by Stang and other SubGenii in what Stang describes as “the incredible flood of inspired art, audio, animation, and above all WORDS that have spewed from the SubGenius High Unpredictables” (Timeline).

This flood of inspiration includes several other SubGenius radio programs. Currently offered by radio broadcast and web stream, the *Puzzling Evidence* show has been hosted by Philo Drummond on KPFA in Berkeley since 2001 (also KFCF Fresno and KZFR Chico) and “Bob’s” *Slacktime Funhouse* hosted by Rev. Susie the Floozie on WREK in Atlanta since 1994. Other SubGenius radio programs that have been broadcast and/or available online are *Radio Synaesthesia* hosted by Dr. Sinister on WCSB, *Ask Dr. Hal*, *The National Cynical Network* hosted by Phineas Narco and Ronald Redball (1999) and the *Area 51* show Hosted by Rev. Cosmik Debris and Pope Jane on WBCQ 5.110 MHz Shortwave. Only available streaming online, the *We-Slack* show hosted by Rev. SlanderBob and *The Ministry of Slack* show offer a mix of other SubGenius radio programs, current and archived. *The Ministry of Slack* is the only show that regularly takes callers during its live stream.

Though the *Hour of Slack* is not an open call-in show, some of the “incredible flood” of creative expression Stang receives finds its way on to the program in the form of music, rants and calls from established characters like “Lonesome Cowboy Dave” or “No Money Mark” who contribute spontaneously in response what the hosts have to say.

But how many hear this lonesome cowboy on the *Hour of Slack* each week? Estimating the radio audience for non-commercial radio stations is particularly difficult since they do not fall within the Arbitron commercial radio surveys and most non-commercial stations have no measurement of their own. However a sense of the size of the SubGenius “congregation” can be derived from a combination of other figures and information. The other difficulty in estimating the size of the congregation is that the CoSG does not require regular dues for membership and has no reliable, central list of dues-paying members. This number would likely be much smaller than the participating membership.

In an email interview, when asked about Church of the SubGenius membership, Stang replies,

Right now my mailing list of addresses that I know are good, for \$30 members, is roughly 8,000. The sad thing is that the list of LOST or DEAD ADDRESSES are another 20,000 at LEAST! (And that's just since we started using a computer for the list, in 1990 or so). (Stang email)

However, Cusack cites a 2009 email exchange in which Stang suggested that there were 40,000 members, a number which might combine official dues-paying members with old address lists. But exact membership figures are difficult to find since anyone can participate in the Church of the SubGenius whether they are a paid member or not. Book sales and website visits can be another way to measure audience. Though he had no numbers from his last publisher Thunder's Mouth Press, in our 2010 interview at Starwood, Stang tries to estimate the size of the church:

Simon & Schuster has sold 100,000 copies of our books in general, mostly *Book of the SubGenius*, roughly. Sub-site has gotten from 8,000 visitors a day all the way up to 27 or 28,000 visitors. I have screen shots and stats...proof it's been a pretty busy website for one that doesn't really...advertise, we don't pay for advertising 'cause the whole thing is an ad, it's an ad for itself. And the radio show helps...I let a lot of stations have it pretty much for free and that's where a lot of our interest comes from....(Stang personal interview audio 10:00-15:00)

Though the weekly *Hour of Slack* SubGenius radio show is now broadcast on WCSB out of Cleveland State University, there are at least 20 other stations across the country that carry the

show as well, all non-commercial stations with no definitive audience measurement (see Appendix C).

Social media offers some clues to participation and interest in the Church of the SubGenius, but not necessarily to the audience size for *Hour of Slack*. Facebook has several SubGenius pages: “SubGenius Slack Hole 2.1” with 701 members, “Church of the SubGenius” with 1,054 members, and “The Church of the SubGenius” page which does not list number of members but has earned 21,333 “likes,” the “J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs” page boasts 8,712 “likes” although the “‘Bob’ Dobbs Community” page only has 58 “likes” in spite of its mini-biography of “Bob.” Though Ivan Stang did not create a separate *Hour of Slack* Facebook page, a page was “automatically generated based on what Facebook users are interested in, and not affiliated with or endorsed by anyone associated with the topic.” This page shows only 154 “likes.” Another bot-generated page called “About Church of the SubGenius” features a more respectable 11,683 “likes.”

While some may dismiss such mouse-click activity as trivial, the Pew Research Internet Project “Social Networking Factsheet” reports that “74% of online adults use social networking sites,” 73% of that group have a college degree and 78% have an income of \$75,000+ suggesting a demographic with buying power and agency.

Another snapshot of SubGenius audience can be found in the download counts of “STASH 1 OF OLDEST Hour of Slack MP3s, PODCASTS” available on the A-infos Radio Project. The 187 episodes were recorded between March 16, 2005 and July 14, 2008 and are numbered from #985 to #1160, though there are some missing numbers and shows that are named but not numbered. As of August 2014 there have been a total of 175,386 downloads ranging from a low of 295 for episode #1144 “Obama vs. Clinton All-Star Gut-Blowout Bout”

recorded in March 2008 to a high of 3,910 for episode #3910 “Sex, Sickness and Slack” recorded in March 2005. Though this suggests a steep and steady decline, the download count is more uneven than that. There are three episodes with over 3,000 downloads, twenty-six episodes with over 2,000 downloads and twenty-two episodes with over 1,000 downloads with an overall average of 938 downloads per show. The highest download activity is between May 10, 2005 and May 17, 2006 when there was a total of 98,645 downloads. As these are among the earliest of the “oldest” shows, one possible reason for higher download numbers may be their longer availability on the Web, though there are several shows within that timeline with lower download counts.

Finally, there have been a few SubGenii who continue to broadcast their own radio programs: Dr. Strange, Suzie the Floozie and Philo Drummond. Drummond's program is the *Puzzling Evidence* show on KPFA in San Francisco. In a series of Facebook chats, Drummond (Steve Wilcox) reflects on his own audience:

It's a 3:00 am live show so our largest audience is probably for the podcasts which are available on itunes and elsewhere there are several hundred downloads collectively each week not counting the streaming on mixcloud with are less than 100 a week. I have no idea how many are downloaded from itunes there are 3 versions there plus a couple facebook sites (Drummond).

Though audiences are likely to overlap, future listener surveys of these SubGenius radio programs would likely expand estimates of the larger congregation of the Church of the SubGenius. Commercial ratings companies like Nielsen do not cover non-commercial stations and their audience extrapolation formula requires demographic information that was not part of the survey and that would be difficult to attain from the thirty non-commercial stations that

broadcast *Hour of Slack*, including broadcast over the Alaska Educational Radio System and four shortwave broadcasts. However, eight of these thirty stations are college or university stations suggesting a much wider potential audience: Cleveland State, Duke, University of Arkansas, University of Connecticut, Georgia Tech, Earlham College, Guilford College, and University of the South.

The SubGenius *Hour of Slack* listener survey

(see Appendix B for survey & VCU IRB)

The SubGenius *Hour of Slack* listener survey was available online at SurveyMonkey for 72 days between May 26, 2014 and August 5, 2014. Initial promotion of the survey included posting an announcement and the link to the survey on two SubGenius Facebook pages as well as SubGenius online chat forums. The stations listed as featuring the program were also contacted by email with an initial request and a follow-up reminder for an announcement and/or posting of the survey on the station's website, though some emails were returned for address problems. These announcements garnered just over sixty responses. A second round of "reminder" postings in the same places resulted in a spike in responses and a final total of 208. Analysis of the final results revealed a response rate varying from a low of 171 for Question 7 about performing on *Hour of Slack* in character or as a caller, to a high of 208 for Question 4 about length of time listening, the response rate averages to 199.

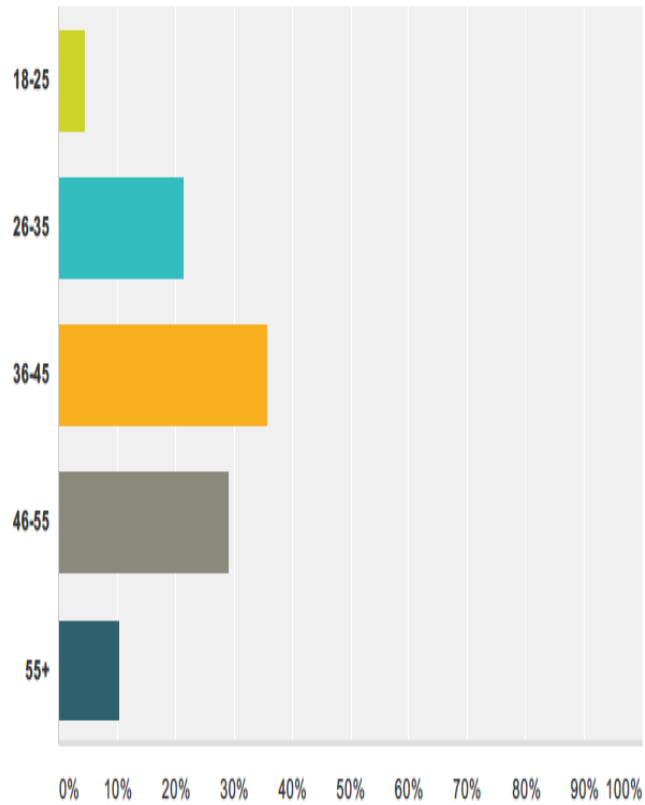
While some of the open-ended answers are classically SubGenius in their irreverence and playfulness and one (Question 10, answer #139) is copied directly from an online ontological essay by Robert Anton Wilson about "E-Prime," a version of English that avoids using "is" or "to be" verbs. The piece is fairly well-known by underground readers so it is doubtful the

respondent was pretending the response is original content, but Wilson's text does address Question 10, "Do you find any social, philosophical or political significance in the *Hour of Slack* radio show? Please explain briefly." The emphasis of "E-Prime" is on the verbal and written acknowledgement of human uncertainty and a reminder of the imperfect mediation of our senses.

The survey questions with pre-specified answer choices lent themselves to easy translation into bar graph charts, several of which will follow. The open-ended questions are more complex to process but in addition to traditional reading, selection and analysis we will review word clouds made from the answers to Questions 9 and 10. Word cloud programs function like a visual concordance and reveals the prominence of a word in a text according to font size – the more prominent, the larger the word. But first, let us examine a few bar graphs for Questions 2, 3, 5, 6 and 9. The full survey and results are available in APPENDIX B.

Q2 Which is your age group?

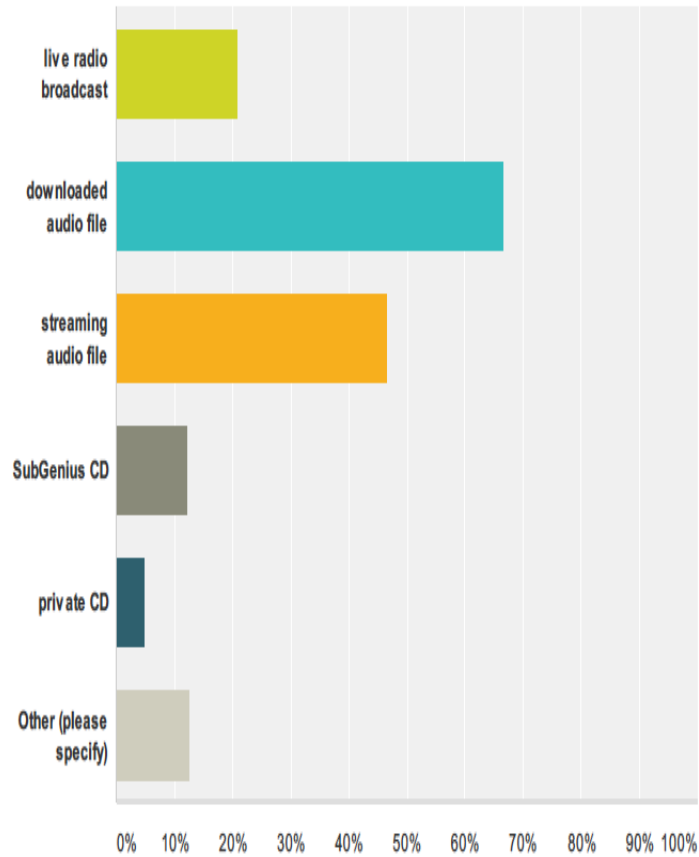
Answered: 207 Skipped: 1



Answer Choices	Responses
18-25	4.35% 9
26-35	21.26% 44
36-45	35.75% 74
46-55	28.99% 60
55+	10.14% 21
Total Respondents: 207	

Q3 In what medium did you listen to the show?

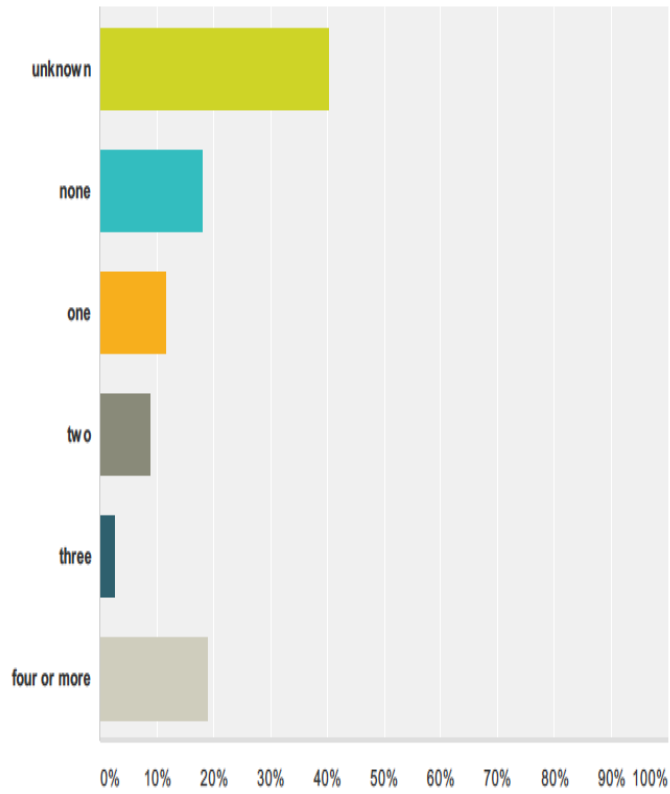
Answered: 206 Skipped: 2



Answer Choices	Responses	
live radio broadcast	20.87%	43
downloaded audio file	66.50%	137
streaming audio file	46.60%	96
SubGenius CD	12.14%	25
private CD	4.85%	10
Other (please specify)	12.62%	26
Total Respondents: 206		

Q5 How many of your friends listen to "Hour of Slack?"

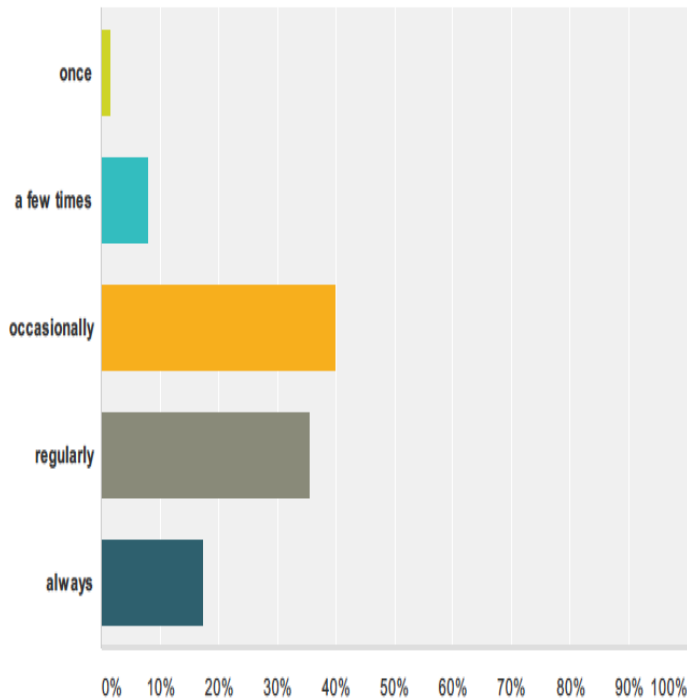
Answered: 206 Skipped: 2



Answer Choices	Responses	
unknown	40.29%	83
none	17.96%	37
one	11.65%	24
two	8.74%	18
three	2.43%	5
four or more	18.93%	39
Total		206

Q6 How would you describe the frequency of your listening to the "Hour of Slack?"

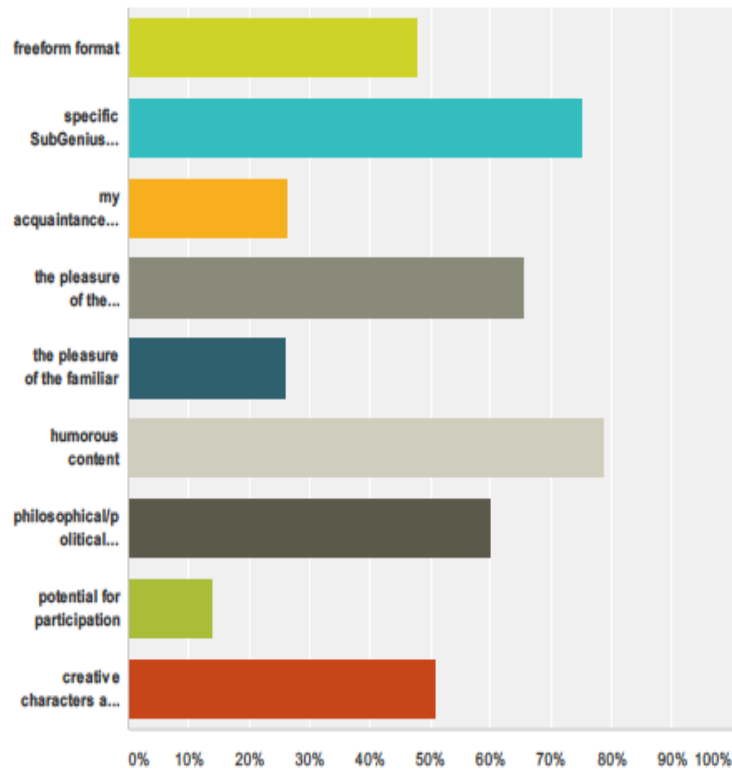
Answered: 203 Skipped: 5



Answer Choices	Responses	
once	1.48%	3
a few times	7.88%	16
occasionally	39.90%	81
regularly	35.47%	72
always	17.24%	35
Total Respondents: 203		

Q8 Why do you listen to "Hour of Slack?" or what makes it an appealing show?

Answered: 197 Skipped: 11



Answer Choices	Responses
freeform format	47.72% 94
specific SubGenius content	75.13% 148
my acquaintance with the performers	26.40% 52
the pleasure of the unexpected	65.48% 129
the pleasure of the familiar	25.89% 51
humorous content	78.68% 155
philosophical/political content	59.90% 118
potential for participation	13.71% 27
creative characters and performance	50.76% 100
Total Respondents: 197	

To sum up some key statistics, survey respondents were primarily between 36 and 55 years old, 36-45 year olds being the largest group at 35.75% and 46-55 year olds comprising 28.99% of respondents. Though only 4.35% of respondents are 18-25, the 26-35 year old respondents comprise 21.26% of the 207 answering Question 2. The next question of which format respondents used to listen to *Hour of Slack*, out of 206 responses, 20.87% listened via live radio broadcast, 46.6% listened to the program via audio stream, but 66.5% listened to the show by audio download.

When asked about how many of their friends listened to *Hour of Slack*, the predominant response is “unknown” at 40.29%, however 41.75% know between one and four friends who listen. Of 203 respondents to Question 3 about the frequency of listening, 39.90% listen occasionally, but 52.71% listen regularly or always. And when asked why they listen and what appeals to them in Question 8, multiple reasons could be chosen by the 197 respondents: 78.66% chose humorous content, 65.48% listen for the pleasure of the unexpected while 50.90% listen for philosophical/political content and 50.76% listen to *Hour of Slack* for its creative characters and performance. Respondents to Question 4 that answered the question of how long, over time, they listened to *Hour of Slack* revealed pockets of surprising devotion: 40 had listened between 1-10 years, 15 had listened between 10-19 years and 11 had been listeners for 20-29 years, a few of whom had helped broadcast the program for that long. According to media researcher Denis List

“attentiveness, satisfaction, and actions after listening” are key indicators and prized responses for broadcasters. Though the “actions” List refers to are consumer purchases, I suspect that listening to or helping to broadcast the program for 10-20 years is a significant sign of “attentiveness and satisfaction.”

A few selections from the open-ended questions here help to illuminate audience taste and perspective. True to the nature of the CoSG, some answers are more amusing than thoughtful, but they retain their value as examples of playful, satirical SubGenius expression. Questions 8 and 9 ask why respondents listen and how they would describe the show. As is the cultural norm for the SubGenii a few of the responses serious, and many are silly but not without creative thought.

“Why do you listen to ‘Hour of Slack?’ or what makes it an appealing show?”

(selections from 203 responses)

- **#14** totally whack and i love that
- **#21** I love to listen and be amazed at how clever and creative those on the show can be. I enjoy the music and the NPR cut ups. Rev. Stang and the rest are great, but most of my enjoyment comes from the music and recorded material. Cowboy Dave can be a little tiresome. He should be called "Tiresome Cowboy Dave." Dr Hal is brilliant. Dr Sinister can be a bit of a condescending douche. Princess Wi, or is it Wee? is always charming. Susie the Floozies work is always amazing.
- **#24** It's art! It helps me get through the day working in my cubicle for a global conglomerate. It provides me with slack!
- **#35** Technical aspects - they did a lot of amazing editing work in the days of tape. They still do a lot of amazing editing, but with computers it doesn't seem quite so technically astonishing.
- **#36** Love the weird music, the audio edits, and the cornucopia of Bob discoveries. I'm a new listener, but discovered my SubGenius heritage long ago.
- **#42** The mixture of spoken word, sound art and music, which is unusual and draws in the listener.
- **#49** feels like being with friends, i find it to be incredibly stimulating creatively, it encourages and reminds me to be more creative and find ways to express myself.
- **#61** A little voice in my elbow tells me to.

New bands or fresh, original or unusual music is a repeated theme in the responses and though not all are SubGenius specific, many are the ballads sung for and about J.R. “Bob” Dobbs. A second repeated theme is stimulation to creative expression, perhaps one of the most important impacts of the CoSG.

“How would you describe ‘Hour of Slack?’”
(selections from 197 responses)

- **#1** genius
- **#2** Creative, delightfully odd, quarky, artistic, occasionally blisteringly funny, evocative.
- **#3** Like having your brain sucked out through a straw, digitized, and sent back over an ISDN line.
- **#9** Inspired lunacy.
- **#11** I wouldn't begin to try and pigeonhole sonic Slack.
- **#14** Re-orienting
- **#15** A mutant tapestry of cut-ups, bizarre rants, and improvisation. I've yet to encounter anything else quite like it.
- **#19** The "Hour of Slack" radio show is an entertaining mix of realities, truths and fictions, with a blend of the underground intelligencespiral that has been bubbling up into the mainstream hipster melange of these times.
- **#20** A sensory overload of random sound collage, satiric commentary and all around humorous treatment of today's topics. Oh, and the Word of "Bob."
- **#21** Fast paced, funny and dead on.
- **#25** A welcome reprieve from the mundane.
- **#26** Gurellia ontonolgy
- **#29** next gen Firesign Theatre comedy, based more on religion than on commercial TV

- **#31** Amazing showcase for unknown artists, thought provoking conversations and generally a great way to unwind from a rough day at work.
- **#38** Ranting against the machine.
- **#40** My pipeline to current events in the SubGenius community, current status of the religion, new revelations, and in jokes.
- **#50** Humor that doesn't insult my intelligence, without being pretentious. Music that's fun and makes no attempt to be "cool". Bouts of multiple simultaneous conversations, that soothe my ADHD & OCD simultaneously. And the occasional side rants of Lonesome Cowboy Dave.
- **#52** Liberation through weirdness.
- **#69** A dadaistic descent into the depths of the psyche mixed with funny soundscapes and nostalgia relevant to cult film and rare music enthusiasts
- **#70** an hour of a loopy religious service, with humor, self-deprecation, often hilarious cut-ups, mashups, sound collage and Dadaistic commentary and ranting
- **#71** The Hour of Slack is an hour of live dada programming. Nonsense and whimsy make for a fun program.
- **#72** Well-formatted chaos.
- **#78** A combination of surreal (but enjoyable) audio clips combined with surprisingly engaging banter.
- **#81** Freeform, humorous, collage, satirical, independent radio
- **#85** It's the last vestige of the golden age of radio. Entertaining in a subversive way.
- **#86** Pure nonsense to cleanse the mind of thought.
- **#88** Nerdvana
- **#90** Creative, Like a stream of consciousness with detours.
- **#93** Random nonsense that makes more sense than current society.
- **#99** Eccentric, Exquisite whackery.
- **#108** An hour and a half of mind bending comedy and cultural satire based on the Church of the Subgenius and seemingly tailored to a psychedelically enhanced perception.

- **#109** subversive, troubling, deep without often meaning to be
- **#110** Hilarious, creative, FREE, unbridled, slime-covered, sacrilegious, smelly, sweet to the taste buds, tingly to the mind.
- **#130** A beacon of Slack beaming hope for the disenfranchised weirdos of the world, offering a sense of community and connection against an increasingly depressing darkness. But that's just one aspect of it. It's also a breath mint.
- **#131** A topical program that satirizes all aspects of American life, religious, political, commercial and celebrity culture.
- **#133** An absurd journey through an absurd world. A show for free thinkers, lovers AND fighters, and any oddball who find seriousness to be an impediment to true enlightenment.
- **#153** Radio verite'
- **#154** Deprogramming music, sketches, and discussion.
- **#157** Soothing and Cathartic. Every time I listen I am reminded that I shouldn't take life anywhere near as seriously as I do sometimes and that nothing is all that important. Which is good. i think / feel / intuit etc. etc.
- **#159** Endearingly odd, and subversively creative
- **#161** an acquired taste
- **#162** A mind-fucking good time.
- **#166** intense, meandering pseudo-depravity and layered in-jokes that only become more nuanced with time and exposure, like an aromatic cheese liberally littered with walnuts and pecans
- **#168** Quality Radio Dada
- **#172** Absurdism on regular schedule.
- **#181** "Funny as hell, with something to offend anyone."
- **#191** Religious parody. Parody of "crackpot" conspiracy theorists by hyperbole. Social satire and legitimate criticism of social, religious, and political events.
- **#196** Total break from the norm.

- **#197** Brilliant!

Question 9 also teases out additional answers to Question 8 as respondents define the program naturally according to what appeals to them. Freeform creativity, the unusual, weird or bizarre, the absurd, DaDa, surreal and the subversive are words and concepts that recur in many respondents' definitions. The appreciation for such qualities suggests a weariness with traditional organization and ideas and a resistance to the creeping regimentation and homogenization of contemporary life that seems to be an automatic result (potential but not necessary) of technology applied to an increasingly complex globally connected world. This began with the alphabet as McLuhan has observed. This process is now vastly accelerated with the ease of digital duplication.

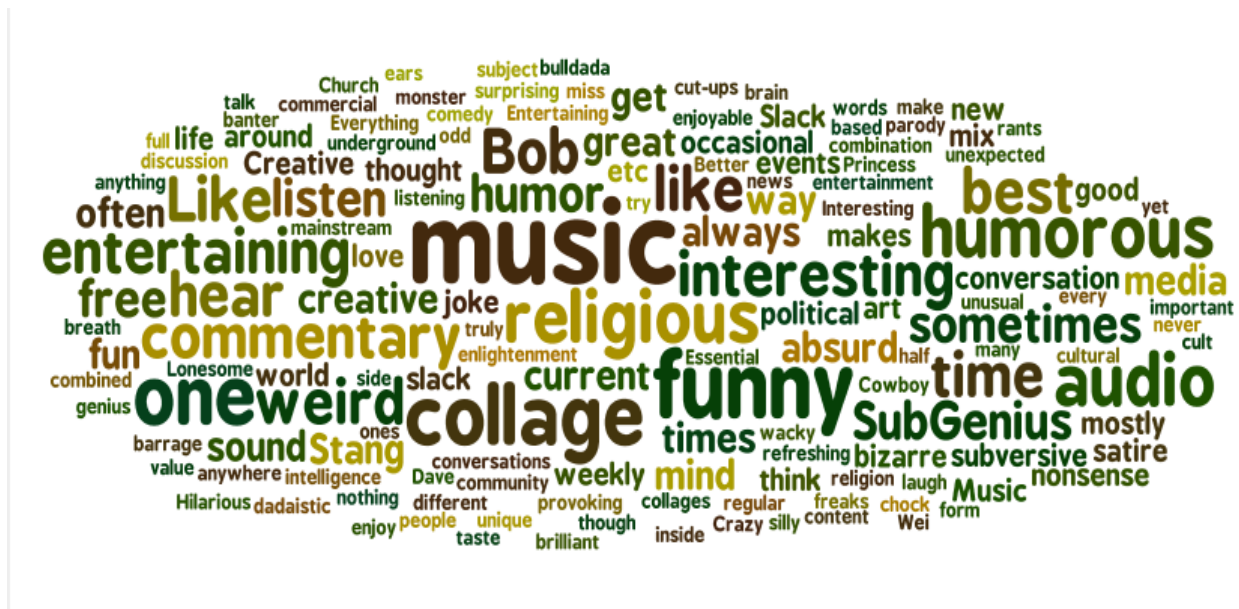
This push toward increasing standardization is explored in Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, but more succinctly expressed by Jacques Ellul in his ecosystemic meditation *The Technological Society*: "To the degree that technique must attain its result with mathematical precision, it has for its object the elimination of all human variability and elasticity" (133). This Taylorization of the human deliberately dampens "inefficient" creativity by a process Burke might call the "bureaucratization of the imaginative" in *Attitudes Toward History*:

If 'comedy' is our attitude of attitudes, then the process of processes which this comedy meditates upon is what we call the 'bureaucratization of the imaginative.'

This formula is designed to name the vexing things that happen when men try to translate some pure aim or vision into terms of its corresponding material embodiment, thus necessarily involving elements alien to the original, 'spiritual' ('imaginative') motive.

(*ATH* 1955 Introduction iii)

To further explore the survey results with a different analytic, the following are a couple of word clouds each made from the collected answers to Questions 9 and 10 with Wordle one of several word cloud generators. These visual concordance images reveal the most frequently used words appear in the largest font and the next most frequent words are in a smaller font and so on. The program allows the user to determine the number of the most frequently occurring words that should be included in the cloud but the program is set at 150, the number used for the following word clouds. The Question 9 word cloud highlights an aspect of *Hour of Slack* that is not within the scope of this essay: the original music created by SubGenii that is a regular feature of the program involving a wide variety songs about “Bob” as well as a diversity of musical styles that are “Bob”-free.



In the Question 10 word cloud, the answer to the question of significance is a bold yes. The word

cloud also reveals suggestive, though less frequently used words like “slack,” “thought,” “think,” “world,” “culture,” and “sense.” In smaller print we can find “important,” “profound,” “Zen,” “modern,” “wisdom,” “truth” and “discourse” - right along with “ignorant,” “old,” “fuck,” “virus” and “bullshit” a collection of words that demonstrates serious SubGenii interests, their chaotic play and reflexive self-satire.

Question 10: Do you find any social, philosophical or political significance in the "Hour of Slack" radio show? Please explain briefly.



Selected word counts: Yes:50, Bob/"Bob": 32, Slack: 24, Political: 24, Social: 22, Philosophical: 21, Significant/significance: 21, Religion/religious: 17

SubCultural Rhizomes

A final way to measure the congregation or assess the cultural impact of the Church of the SubGenius is to note their interactions with various cultural icons, thinkers, artists and musical celebrities, sometimes collaborating for several years. For evidence, we will review a few selections from the SubGenius archives below. Rather than growing deep, fixed roots and branching out to the blooming of profitable celebrity, the Church of the SubGenius stays just at

or below the surface, spreading out in many directions, sprouting new life asexually without mainstream pollination and able to survive in unfavorable economic and cultural circumstances.

This enthusiastic letter from R. Crumb focuses on the publication of some SubGenius materials in Crumb's *Wierdo* comics and he characterizes the CoSG as "The Relidgun of Laffs" just above a Crumb version of "Bob" walking with Crumb's iconic "Keep on Truckin'" stride.



Ken Keysey became a member of the Church of the SubGenius as "Rev. Hardly Visible" and registered for the 1981 SubGenius convention the "SubCon." Below is a 1982 letter and contribution made in true SubGenius spirit.

c/o Keesey
85829 Ridgeway
Pleasant Hill, Or. 97401

July 1982

Attention, all you sub-genii who
claim to represent Bob:

You are taking yourselves ^[and your religion] entirely too
seriously. I used to love reading "the
stark fist", but with your new issue,
more than 50 pages, you have
invaded the realm of wretched excess!
It now takes up all my slack
time to stagger through this
voluminous rag. Slack off!

Dobbs would understand my dilemma.
Surely, a few pages would suffice.
[It always did, until now.]

Wishing you luck,
H. V.

The reverend Hardly Visible.

P.S. I am enclosing money.

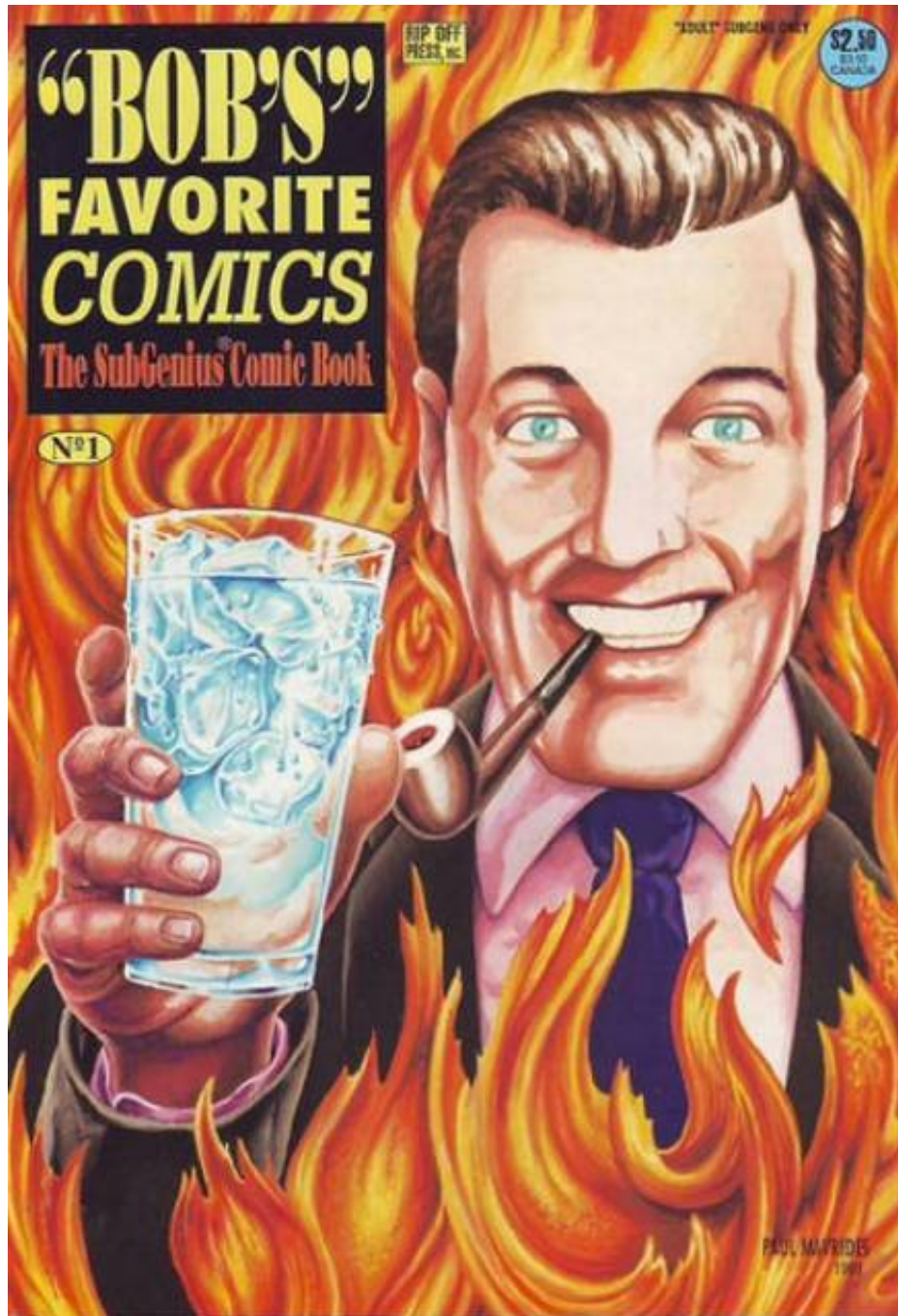


Mark Mothersbaugh of the 1980's band DEVO became a member of the Church of the SubGenius and a long-time creative collaborator, his voice notable in several SubGenius media barrage tapes and other mixes. Below Mothersbaugh acknowledges a film "Douglas" Smith

(Stang) made and sent for review. Reveling in the SubGenius spirit of comic symbolic tinkering, Mothersbaugh sends a creatively embellished postcard that weaves SubG references with his own symbolic play. This initial creative exchange ultimately led to Smith becoming the assistant producer for DEVO's MTV video "R U Experienced?" Today, Mothersbaugh still favors his post-card style visual art, some of which is featured in his "Myopia" display at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver until April 2015. Mothersbaugh also works as a top Hollywood film composer, most recently working with Wes Anderson to score the theme for *The Lego Movie* which has a central theme that parallels with a core SubGenius creative and intellectual philosophy of "wild style" experimental play and resistance to fixity.



Comic artist Paul Mavrides a long time contributor to SubGenius publications, most known for his 1960's counterculture "Freak Brothers" comics, illustrated the cover and single 1989 issue #1 of "Bob's" *Favorite Comics* published by Rip Off Press which is now somewhat hard to find but ranges in price from \$10.40 up to \$31.99.



On the 91st episode of *Hour of Slack* (re-reun on #1043) Stang describes *Illuminatus!* Trilogy writer Robert Anton Wilson as “a huge influence on the development of the Church of the SubGenius unquestionably” (*Hour of Slack* #1043 00:02:52) who joined the church and donned the title “Pope.” In 2006 Stang taught the first courses on the Church of the SubGenius at

Wilson's Maybe Logic Academy with a faculty that has included media critic Douglas Rushkoff, VR trailblazer Mark Pesce and Goddess movement writer Patricia Monaghan.

Other SubGenius members who have played a notable part in popular culture are David Byrne of the Talking Heads, Dr. Timothy Leary, Hakim Bey, Dave Barry, Pee-Wee Herman, Frank Zappa, Penn Jillette, Jello Biafra and Otter and Morning Glory Zell of the Church of All Worlds. Tim "Otter" Zell helped to found this officially recognized tax-exempt church in 1962 based on a church of the same name in Robert A. Heinlein's 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. This suggests that the creative religious invention practiced by SubGenii is not only practiced by others, it can actually develop into a recognized institution. Cusack devotes a chapter of *Invented Religions* to the Church of All Worlds describing it as "closest to the religious mainstream" after over 50 years of existence.

Two final cultural connections worth noting are the Church of the SubGenius' influence on the Upright Citizens Brigade improvisational comedy group, and their collaboration with the audio collage group Negativland. In a 2010 email exchange Alex Sidtis of the Upright Citizens Brigade replies briefly to my query about SubGenius influence "yes, the UCB has been influenced by the likes of Bob. Del Close was a huge fan and Matt Besser and Adam McKay were fans" (Sidis) and though no additional detail is provided, the connections are likely in their shared experimental, improvisational and culturally observant practices.

The Negativland connection however is a bit more developed and they eventually performed at a couple of SubGenius devivals. Writing under the name Doug Smith, Stang wrote reviews for the group whose audio collage style Smith describes as "pure, uncut Ear Candy" a collage of sound bites at

about ten cuts per second, washing back and forth over the headphones listener as if her were being buffeted by a high wind inside the cranium...really Sound

Animation – a vast cartoon tapestry created from a zillion snatches of things you hear every day (SubG archive).

Negativland is the group that coined the term and concept of “cultural jamming” on their 1984 cassette release *JamCon '84*, a term that was recast by Mark Dery in a 1990 *New York Times* article “The Merry Pranksters And the Art of the Hoax” as the now well-theorized concept of “culture jamming” (Dery).

Culture jamming has become a lucrative cottage industry, considered by some to be hypocritical, with slick publications like *Adbusters* and artists like Shepard Fairey and his OBEY Giant “manufacturing quality dissent since 1989” profiting comfortably from their sharp critiques of consumer capitalism but the Church of the SubGenius, though legally a “for-profit” business, has consistently remained low key and low profit. This lack of mainstream profitability may be partially due to the “insider” nature and the extreme strangeness and sophistication of SubGenius expression, but it may also be accepted as the natural result of their central philosophy of “Slack” that valorizes leisure and creative play over profit and celebrity, two things that gradually but inevitably corrode that time for leisure and creative play.

Conclusion

Dennis List from media research website *Audience Dialog* writes in “Measures of Radio Audiences” that audience size is not the sole measure to consider, other things can be the measure of a program’s impact such as

attentiveness, satisfaction, and actions after listening...

actions after listening are the ultimate goal of many radio programs.

Advertisements succeed not when the audience is large but when people buy the

advertised product – or, in the case of social marketing, change their behavior in the desired ways.” (List – italics mine)

Attentiveness and satisfaction may be difficult to measure, but “actions after listening” are visible and certainly describe the vigorously creative participation in SubGenius devivals held across the U.S. and Europe, or the decades of ongoing creation of images, audio, video or material objects that materialize or expand the church philosophy of “SLACK” and the cosmic mythology of “Bob.” Very few radio programs could claim a similar response from listeners.

Sometimes this creative response is simply posted on the web in the vast archives of subgenius.com or on one of several SubGenius Facebook pages, some creations are used for costumes or props in devivals, and some are featured in one of the SubGenius art shows that have been held in Dallas (1982 & 1983), New York City (1990), Amsterdam (1992) and Austin (2001).



Sometimes SubGenius creative expression appears in local graffiti. The face of “Bob” is present all over the world such as the stencil above with dual “Bob” heads and the caption “Enjoy Chemtrails,” one of many jabs at common conspiracy theories satirized by the Church of the SubGenius. How common is the chemtrail conspiracy? A Google search for “chemtrail conspiracy” yields 458,000 websites, a YouTube search produces 762,000 results suggests a surprising amount of interest. But it doesn't stop there - "Bob" is everywhere. The iconic face of "Bob" lends itself as easily to the wheat-paste flyer format as it does to spray-paint stencil.

Such graffiti do not necessarily indicate that the painter is an actual church member or even a regular participant, but they do exemplify the satirical symbolic tinkering of the Church of the SubGenius and the viral potential of the iconic face of “Bob.” Though the current number of SubGenii in Richmond, Virginia is unknown, we do have evidence of a pioneer SubGenius “clench” in a photo from 1982 that clearly shows an alien saucer leaving the scene in the upper left corner, perhaps in a dry-run for X-Day.



Richmond writer Dale Brumfield was a one-time participant in the Church of the SubGenius, contributing his own collages of images and church slogans. During an email interview, he recalled that his initial contact had been through the ‘zine scene of the early 1980s when the CoSG began publishing their ‘zine *Stark Fist*. “They got in touch with me based on the one-shot zines my friend Bill Pahnelas and I were doing, plus ThroTTle magazine. I think My friend Michael Clautice may have contributed also, or at least collected all their stuff” (Brumfield). Since he had been involved around the time that the Richmond “clench” picture was taken, Brumfield was able to identify a couple of the people in the picture,

In the picture I recognize on the far left Paul Watson and right beside him Billy Burke. Paul is a musician here in town still - he was one of the founding members of a band called the Orthotonics. Billy has been a fixture in the counterculture here since the late sixties. I really don't know where he is now, but he shows up on Facebook periodically (Brumfield).

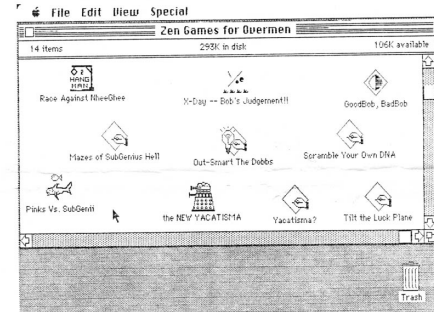
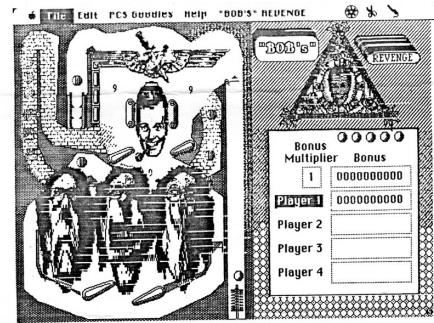
The creative empowerment of Burke's comic frame and its deployment by the Church of the SubGenius is such that from a single "clench" of only a few members blossoms of creative expression can burst forth – even in the capital of the Confederacy.

When considering the value or impact of the Church of the SubGenius, perhaps more significant than exact membership or audience figures is its inspiration to self-authorized, uninhibited, spontaneous creative expression. Our concluding observations will be about this creative inspiration in its most activist and publicized form as manifest in the "identity correction" pranks of the Yes Men and the playful protest performances of Rev. Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. But in its more widespread semi-underground form, this creative expression is manifest in SubGenii everywhere and the simple joy of their ongoing playful participation in artistic compositions and other CoSG rituals.

In the examples of SubGenius creativity below we have two images that simulate a span of history from the image of what looks like an ancient stone engraving of "The Vision of Bub-Unzuk III" to a screen-shot of an early SubGenius video game for Mac suggesting a high level of technical skill among SubGenii. The creative congregation of the Church of the SubGenius, a group for non-joiners, is both ancient and contemporary – and uncountable.



*The Vision of Bub-Unzuk III (detail), from Ur. About 2600 B.C.
Stone, height 25". State Museums, Berlin.*

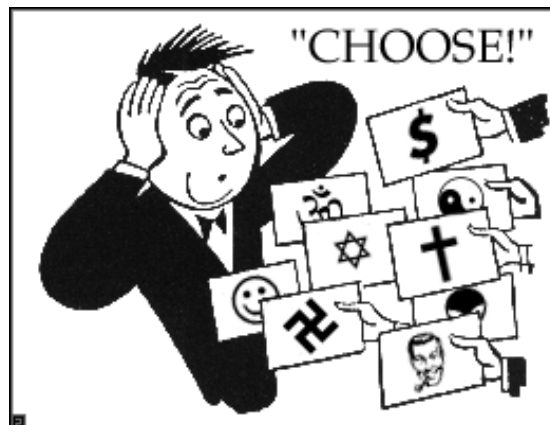




Chapter 7

Burke's Rhetoric Applied: *Hour of Slack* and *Revelation X*

As noted above, the selected excerpts have been categorized and each category will include brief discussion of the category along with SubGenius excerpts interspersed with illuminating passages selected primarily from Burke's *Attitudes Toward History* but also from his other works, and occasionally supported by secondary source commentary.



A) Religion/Cults/Authority

“The Great OZ has spoken!! Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

“But that’s the thing about religion – you don’t question that kind of stuff. As “Bob” said, you don’t use your *mind* to think about your religion, ‘cause that just wrecks everything!” (*Hour of Slack* #1148)

In his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms” Burke refers to “rulers, courts, parliaments, laws, educators, constabulary” and their concomitant “moral slogans” as “Symbols of Authority” that

evoke an unwarranted devotion. Further, Burke traces “the influence exerted upon the policies of education” by this power structure noting how it encourages those without the power to believe they are stakeholders in a system where the only way to regain that power is by “allegiance to the structure that has dispossessed [them]”(329-330). For a variety of reasons and practical advantages, everyone wants to be in the club, a member of the “in” group, one of the powerful with special knowledge and privilege whether the group be religious, civic, economic or otherwise oriented.

Humans have an affinity for forming groups and communal action is a kind of organic social technology that has been useful in throughout our history. Whether the communal action comes from a temporary coalescence or an established institution or movement, to be part of a powerful group or part of a group with “insider” knowledge has an ancient and practical appeal. This appeal is emphasized in *Hour of Slack* #1 in a collage of unidentified audio clips that begins with a bold announcer’s voice addressing “potential initiates” over the sound of an ominous trumpet fanfare and making a request suggestive of the rhythms of commercial television:

“Welcome potential Initiates, and remain with us for the next thirty minutes.”

“Bob?” “Bob?”

“The message is now part of and registered in your subconscious mind. Every time you say, see, hear or think ‘what about Slack?’ that’s your key phrase. It will trigger the entire message without your being aware of it.

(00:19 - 00:50)

In the first thirty seconds of the first episode of *Hour of Slack* there is an appeal to the human desire for initiation and insider group membership, the revelation of the sacred name “Bob”

repeated as a question followed by suggestions of MK-ULTRA style subliminal hypnotic programming with key words, all of which are fertile seeds for critical analysis of religions, cults and authority – all central concerns of the Church of the SubGenius.

One of Burke's "Pivotal Terms" in *Attitudes Toward History* is the phrase "Being Driven into a Corner" he explores orthodoxy, symbolic exchange and excommunication. As if describing Stang and SubGenius cultural negotiation, Burke writes "since the orthodoxy 'owns' all the recognized avenues of approach to sociality, if the excommunicated would avoid the corner of negativism, he must recruit a group who steal the insignia of the orthodox" and what is a better signifier of orthodoxy than an official or canonical book? (223)

The introductory page of *Revelation X* begins with authoritative ecclesiastical language affirming the occult nature, secondary canonical authority, necessity and provenance of *The "Bob" Apocryphon* a title that admits to the fictional nature of its revelation.

"Hidden Teachings And Deuterocanonical Texts of J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs"

"The 'Bob' Apocryphon"

"Appointed to be Read in Churches"

"Translated out of the Original Tongues by The SubGenius Foundation, Inc." (*Revelation X* i)

After beginning with an orthodox style description of the text, the rhetorical appeal shifts back to the desire for insider membership status in "the Chosen", enhanced with an all-capitals shouting of the predestined nature of the reader's encounter with the text: "**You are one of the Chosen** – and this book falling into your hands was *NO ACCIDENT!* Every word in this book I here because **you** are reading it." (*Revelation X* ii)

Religions, cults and other institutionalized authorities often emphasize group identity and obedience to an orthodox objectivity, a fixed single truth, The One True Way that naturally serves to define, justify and support the power of its hierarchy. As Gee writes in *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, “what people in power believe is simply an expression of their controlling and powerful positions in the social hierarchy...and their desire...to retain and enhance their power” (28). This hierarchy also seeks to organize “society and its institutions so as to encourage ways of thinking and behaving which enhance their interests” even if these interests run counter to the interests of the whole (28).

While this can be true in government, business, academia and religion, it is especially true in cults where obedience and faith in a rigid system with ritual use of its specialized terminology (a “terministic screen”) are essential for the cult to function and stoke the zeal of its members. The CoSG mocks this by mimetic exaggeration that suggests the single hidden subtext for serious seekers:

The only way you’re going to get truly, metaphysically high off this material is to snort *between* the lines. (But what you read between the lines must be taken *literally*. DO NOT read your own message into it. **There is only one true interpretation.**) (*Book 17*).

The orthodox “one true interpretation” functions as a set of blinders. Burke argues that our observations and interpretations are made of words that naturally blind us to other possibilities, words he calls “terministic screens.” In *Language As Symbolic Action* Burke argues that any terminology inevitably shapes and limits our perspective by “screening off” other aspects of reality that do not fit within a given list of authoritative terms. Burke further explains: “In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of

possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (46). In *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric, and a Theory of Social Change* Barbara Biesecker develops this idea further suggesting that rather than being an objective final truth, authorized knowledge may reign because of chance, human ego, power struggle and tradition:

There are no transhistorical or neutral justifications of the views a particular social arrangement favors. No epistemological procedures exist that can cleanse our knowledge of its multiple origins, or prohibit the effects that escape our intentions and think us as we think we are mastering them. Any form of knowledge is a product and reflection of human wishes and practices, including the will to power. The availability of certain kinds of knowledge is as much a matter of contingency, the available struggles for power, and the history of past and present practices as it is of the triumph of truth over error (84).

We cannot escape the influence of our own terminology and must be ever vigilant to avoid mistaking the screen of our specialized jargon for actual reality.

Playing around to avoid the blinders of terministic screens, the Church of the SubGenius subverts its own potential to enshrine a fixed and final meaning with doctrines like “any inanity *spouted* by a SubGenius, at any time, automatically becomes part of orthodox, sanctified SubGenius Church Liturgy,” a teaching that includes the right to deny such inanities through the “Sacred Doctrine of Erasability” (*Book 70*). The Church of the SubGenius encourages participants to mutate previous creations, contribute new concepts, terminology, characters and events to the SubGenius mythos and establish local “clenches” with other SubGenii which are then encouraged to splinter and create new doctrines, a practice that both satirizes religious divisions and prevents SubGenii from falling prey to their own kind of doctrinal rigidity. In these

and other ways, the Church of the SubGenius seems to follow Gee's prescription: "by stressing this multiplicity and indeterminacy...the rest of us can resist such domination" (129).

With a proliferation of self-proclaimed (sometimes ordained) "Reverends" and "Popes," the Church of the SubGenius encourages the cultural blasphemy of self-authorization along with the creation of a unique character and official title for participation in, and addition to, SubGenius ritual mythology. SubGenius Ministers obtain their legal ordainment credentials via the Universal Life Church Monastery that has ordained 20 million people worldwide since 1977 including a wide spectrum of celebrities. According to the ULC website,

The Universal Life Monastery strongly believes in the rights of all people from all faiths to practice their religious beliefs, regardless of what those beliefs are...so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others and are within the law of the land and one's conscience. (*ULC website*).

This statement of belief is hardly a complex theological stance, but what the ULC has in common with the CoSG is the goal of self-authorization for a positive purpose. While states and localities vary on marriage certification requirements, the ULC encourages its ministers to officiate at weddings, funerals, etc. Cusack cites Stang's claim that in 1998 there were 10,000 paid-up SubGenius ministers ordained through the ULC (90).

Perhaps the most radical aspect of the Church of the SubGenius is that, unlike most religions, SubGenii readily admit their religion is a fiction that they continue to develop and that others are free to join them or invent our own religion. Stang and CoSG literature like *Revelation X* repeat a key church motto that they are "The World's First Industrial Church" that openly acknowledges its commercial production and unapologetically solicits donations, often

facetiously though with genuine need, to satirize the endless calls for donations needed to support the megachurches. Cusack describes their deliberately unfixed, flexible perspective and skepticism:

...like Discordianism, of which it is often considered an offshoot....the Church of the SubGenius explicitly embraces the position that there is no one truth, that one's perspective dominates and that all teachings are mutable and often contradictory (88).

This denial of authoritative objectivity simultaneous with the elevation of subjective experience is potentially subversive to institutional powers. According to the OED since the late 12th Century the meaning of “authority” has included the “power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.” Perhaps more intriguing, the word authority is also associated with “prestige” a word whose etymology includes “trick, deceit, illusion...to bind tightly...blindfold, hence, to dazzle the eyes.” Ironically, the Church of the SubGenius urges participants to “pull the wool over your own eyes” and “relax in the safety of your own delusions” as a way of growing out of comfortable but mistaken perspectives (*Book*).

SubGenii satirize religion, authority, titular obeisance and all encrusted perspectives by capturing their terms and symbols of authority (jargon, icons, clothing, gestures, rituals, paraphernalia) then revising and re-deploying them in a way that highlights the folly of seeking and revering the fixed and final. Cultic groups often rely on the desire for authority and stability as well as the credulity of their members in the deployment of a specialized terminology with specific, rigidly fixed definitions that must be used exclusively to reinforce the authority of the cult. Gee's observation is that institutions in general try to retain their authority by trying to fix meaning and by rejecting the naturally fluid characteristics of language:

It is through attempts to deny this inevitable multiplicity and indeterminacy of interpretation that social institutions (like schools) and elite groups in a society often privilege their own version of meaning as if it were natural, inevitable, and incontestable (*Social Linguistics* 129).

Mirror-mocking this, the Church of the SubGenius invents its own terms, revises traditional definitions and deploys slogans that at once exemplify and mock cultic profiteering and consumerist impatience with satirical phrases like “You’ll PAY to know what you REALLY think!” or “INSTANT ANSWERS TO EVERYTHING!” (*Book* 10). Though each slogan involves a consumerist value (profit and instant gratification) they both acknowledge the natural human desire for self-knowledge and knowledge about the world. However, the appeal of the cultic also comes from the satisfaction and sense of superiority that comes from being an insider or initiate with secret knowledge. As satirized in Pamphlet #1:

The Church of the SubGenius is the ultimate secret order, the superior brain cult for those who ‘know better’ but who demand in their LUST for GRINS a spectacular, special-effects-laden belief system – a ‘stuporstition.’ (P1)

Their hybrid term “stuporstition” emphasizes the stupefying effect of excessive or irrational religious devotion based on fear, and is but one of many clever, satirical neologisms that populate SubGenius propaganda.

The power of language is such that those who deploy their religious or secular titles have greater authority and sometimes are less carefully examined because of a culture of titular trust and reverence that seems almost universal, perhaps even latent in the taxonomic nature of language itself. SubGenii have fun with authoritative titles. In *The Book of the SubGenius* on the page that lists contributors, SubGenius satire of titular self-importance is evident in the variety of

traditional honorifics they give themselves such as “Dr.,” “St.,” “Pope,” “Pastor,” “Rev.,” “Sir,” “Capt.,” “Bishop,” “Prof.,” and “Maestro” (*Book*).

The purpose of titles is not only role identification, but also the establishment of specific authoritative positions in a hierarchy and the subsequent submission of underlings. The highest title on the page of SubGenius contributors is assigned to J.R. “Bob” Dobbs who is the “High Epop” of the Church of the SubGenius. Obeisance is implicit in authoritative titles as evident in the mission statement of the *Hour of Slack* Radio Ministry “to brainwash you totally into abject lifelong subservience to The High Epop and Living SlackMaster, J. R. "Bob" Dobbs, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY” (*A-infos Radio Project*).

Perhaps partially chosen for its esoteric and unusual sound, an “epopt” is, according to the OED, someone who looks on, “a beholder” perhaps suggesting the all-seeing eye of Masonry. In ancient Greece the word epopt designated someone who had been initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries which remain somewhat obscure even today. One point of historical agreement about the ritual is the profound and lasting impact reported by initiates in rapturous language for which scholars have had various theories. Some, like Mara Lynn Keller credit the theatrical and symbolic aspects of the event (Drama, Sayings & Displaying), while others like Wasson and Hofmann suggest that the *kykeon* communion drink of barley, water and mint was made psychoactive by an ergot fungus on the barley.

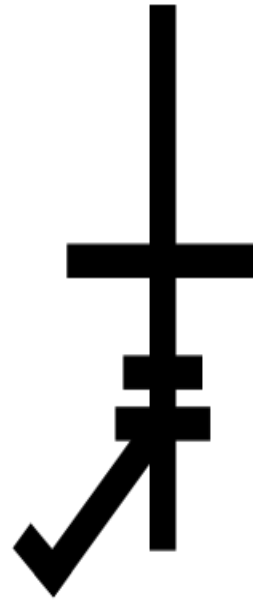
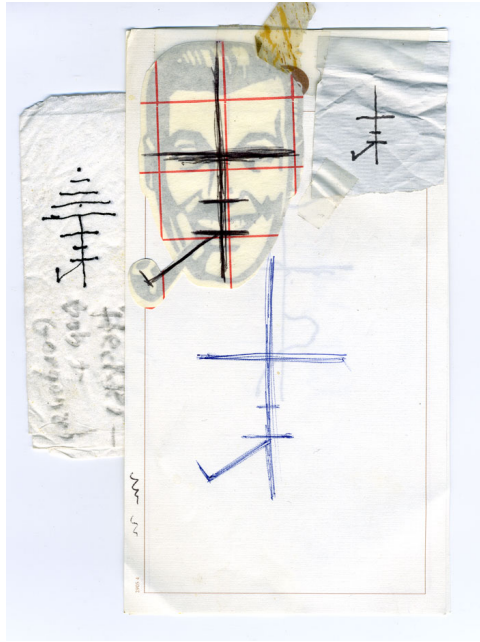
Whatever the case, as an initiate of these mysteries, “Bob” has the authoritative title “Epop” to flaunt that simultaneously suggests surveillance and initiation. The power to monitor and the right to insider knowledge are often derived from an elite group experience involving powerful symbols and ritual expressions, religious or secular.

In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke articulates an important insight about the power of word-symbols and their semantic capacity:

A symbol is a vessel of much more content than is disclosed by its ‘face value’ as a label. Words may contain attitudes much more complex and subtle than could possibly be indicated in the efficient simplifications of a ‘practical’ dictionary (329).

Though we generally interpret the word semantic as it is defined secondarily in the OED, “relating to meaning in language,” the primary definition is “relating to divination through the interpretation of signs,” suggesting that images can contain similarly complex semantic content. The imagic power of the non-alphabetic symbol may have potential for a larger web of signification because it lacks the specificity of the alphabetic symbol that can limit potential meaning. For example a national flag can be interpreted much more widely than a governing document.

For the SubGenius, the face of “Bob” is clearly “a vessel of much more content than is disclosed by its ‘face value’” as seen below where “Bob’s” face gives birth to the enigmatic icon of the Church.



Original sketch translating the face of “Bob” to an icon. (Archive)

The schematic icon of “Bob’s” face approximates institutional religious symbols but with a completely different significance, simultaneously satirizing and evoking the authority of religious hierarchy with its similar structure. The Christian cross, a rectilinear form associated with vicarious sacrifice, is transformed into an enigmatic icon for a smiling, pipe-smoking face that signifies a vicarious experience of another kind. Its ambiguity functions powerfully on viewers as Mitchell observes in *What do pictures want?* “The potency of these images doesn’t reside merely in their presentness or topical currency but in their status as enigmas and omens, harbingers of uncertain futures” (12).

These imagined “uncertain futures” are partially a result of the breakdown of faith in traditional metanarratives (think Gary Ross’ 1998 film *Pleasantville*), stories that have guided and comforted us in the past like the American Dream, equality of opportunity, faith in nationalism, free markets, political agency and the centrality of organized religion. Biesecker further articulates future uncertainty:

On the one hand, then, it is out of our deeply troubled relation to the perpetual upheavals within and relentless splinterings of our contemporary life world -- upheavals and splinterings that undermine every certainty and underscore the incompleteness of every meaning and every position -- that the felt need for a retheorization of the social emerges (74-75).

In the seventeen years since Biesecker's "felt need" these metanarratives have now been retheorized by academics, remixed and redeployed with new media tools - the Church of the SubGenius being but one of many groups to revel in such cultural reinscriptions. The combined use of some of these tools such as Social Network Sites and the Smartphone have been instrumental in subverting narratives of authority sometimes as playful technology with amusing but critical viral messaging, other times as documentary technology recording the hypocrisy, criminality or brutality of those in power.

Burke's concern with authority and hierarchy focuses on their anti-evolutionary influence as he suggests in "Order," chapter III of *A Rhetoric of Motives* where he describes a global "hierarchic psychosis" that is "particularly sinister in nations which are largely ruled by the 'dead hand' of institutions...unsuited to the present" -- a description suggesting a culture of anti-evolutionary stasis kept alive by a jealous bureaucracy not unlike that which led to the fall of the Soviet Empire (281).

In his critique of the rigid hierarchy and controlling nature of Stalinism, Zamyatin explains the value of critical novels like *We* writing that "harmful literature is more useful than useful literature, for it is an antientropic, it is a means of combating calcification, sclerosis, crust, moss, quiescence." Such "calcification" and "quiescence" are an inherent danger in all institutions, political, religious, academic or artistic. Zamyatin argues that "dogmatization in

science, religion, social life or art is the entropy of thought” suggesting the need for heretical breakdown of encrusted ideas, perspectives and practices to allow an organic fluency to deposit fertile fresh insights and new hybrid creations which McLuhan argues in *Understanding Media* “breed furious release of energy and change” thus maintaining necessary intellectual and creative fluency (74).

In sympathy with this notion, SubGenius literature and performance is regularly populated with references to the necessity of constant vigilance against fixity, the promotion of open-minded critical thinking, creative experimentation and the pursuit of deliberate mutation for evolution. SubGenii satirically explore a serious subject: human survival and the need to evolve beyond the dangerous, unsustainable systems that have motivated wars, environmental degradation and WMD development while misdirecting attention with consumerism and spectacle.

The Book of the SubGenius refers to this step in evolution a “post-human” race, and according to the OED the word “post-human” was first used in M. Parmelee’s 1916 study *Poverty & Social Progress in a surprisingly relevant citation*: “But even if such a post-human animal did come into existence, it is difficult to believe that it could carry on the necessary economic activities without using a certain amount of formal organization” the assumption being that, whether fully biological or technologically enhanced, the primary purpose of a human life is “necessary economic activities” (319). Parmelee’s perspective is no doubt inspired by F.W. Taylor and his influential and economically useful 1911 book *Principles of Scientific Management* which Parmelee defends in *Poverty & Social Progress* (414). When Ford’s employees could not keep up with the inhuman pace of the assembly line, he called on Taylor to measure and time his workers to make them more efficient parts of the mass production machine.

Now, nearly a century later, this economically sectarian perspective of human purpose and interaction still has a substantial congregation in spite of the warnings of Huxley's horror of hyper-efficiently mass-produced human cogs in *Brave New World*.

Today post-human can evoke the "Transhumanist" perspective that focuses on the technological augmentation, and eventual elimination of, the human body as confidently predicted by brilliant Technorati like Google's Director of Engineering Ray Kurzweil author of *The Singularity is Near, When Humans Transcend Biology*. By contrast, the Church of the SubGenius philosophy is biologically celebratory, sensually adventurous, unashamed and unafraid of the body – and their vision of evolution is primarily *mental*.

This SubGenius evolution is described in *The Book of the SubGenius* where, between the table of 'CONTENT' (stress on 2nd syllable) and the page heading "Prophecy Crusade" it is written:

WE THE SUBGENIUSES OF THE POST-HUMAN RACE, in order to preserve life on this planet from immanent destruction, reestablish intelligence...grip the reins of human evolution, control reproduction and mutation...do hereby admit ourselves as such and thus ordain this Advertisement of the SubGenius race of Earth (8).

The SubGenius declaration satirizes Transhumanist confidence by taking on the prerogative of the embodied potentate and simply declaring themselves to be a new post-human race – not to live stronger, better, longer but to "preserve life on this planet from immanent destruction" – a motivation Burke articulates multiple times in *Attitudes*.

The Book of the SubGenius continues to explore the process of evolution in a brief blurb that notes the impact of technology on human evolution and how this determines where our next step in evolution will occur. “With the advent of technology, major physical evolution ceases. Thus, the next viable mutation must be mental – a new mind/world aspect” which, according to SubGenius doctrine, is the next stage in evolution known as “Homo Excelsior” (12).

Like many SubGenius expressions, “Homo Excelsior” functions in two directions at once, exemplifying Burke’s symbolic tinkering while exhibiting a satirically reflexive perspective about themselves. The key is in the new evolutionary descriptor “excelsior” which variously denotes elevated aspiration, wood shavings or tiny type. No doubt SubGenii are sincere about the elevated aspiration of deliberate evolutionary mutation but they are not forgetting that their religious texts are more likely to end up as packing material, or if they’re lucky, the Church of the SubGenius will end up as a Burkean footnote in tiny type, destined to be lost in a radiating maze of fascinating and insightful connections.

It is initially unclear what the SubGenius “new mind/world aspect” is, but they see technology as forcing our mental evolution. In his 1983 Afterword to *ATH*, Burke’s view of technology is that it “has a kind of built-in hopefulness... even to hoping that a worldwide political system adequate to control its uses and misuses can somehow be contrived” (429-430). Perhaps this is the “mental mutation” of the SubGenius that brings on this “new mind/world aspect” perspective. Simply by favoring the idea of a “worldwide political system” would put Burke in the sights of many a conspiracy theorist today, and we will see later how the Church of the SubGenius plays with this particular cultural manifestation.

Critics of Burke might smile at his recommendation of systematic approach since his natural “ranging” style of thinking and study did not fit prevailing habits of linear/hierarchic

thinking and this may be the subconscious impact of the phonetic alphabet. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan describes this impact and observes the dawning of a “new mosaic form” that better exemplifies Burke’s style of thinking and is easily a more accurate metaphor for the Web than fragmented linearity.

Centuries of typographic conditioning in patterns of lineal uniformity and fragmented repeatability have, in the electric age, been given increasing critical attention by the artistic world. The lineal process has been pushed out...it is the new mosaic form of the TV image that has replaced the Gutenberg structural assumptions (308).

It is also interesting to note that the first definition of “serious” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* has to do with continuous serial or sequential arrangement.

Perhaps it is this structuring that gives birth to our seemingly innate mistrust of alternative patterning and our resistance to the potential of the haphazard. Burke understood this potential and stuck to his organic process in spite of criticism. In what sounds like a proto-deconstruction or proto-intertextuality observation, Burke accepts the critiques and articulates the specific analytical value of his approach:

...the material ‘radiated’ in various directions, and these ‘radiations’ could not have been traced any other way...The problem of ‘radiations’ forced us to consider repeatedly the labyrinthine way in which one term involves others...all those side routes have their ways of connecting with one another, in the labyrinthine city of a terminology. (*ATH* 1955 Intro. vi)

At this dawning of the World Wide Web, endless labyrinth and dense interconnection are not only the information reality at our fingertips they are relevant and useful metaphors for thinking that might be profitably adopted to expand our perspective beyond the rectilinear.

Even SubGenius Pamphlet #1, though composed primarily of traditional typography, nevertheless remains a bewildering welter of strange references, commentary and connections, a small jam-packed sample of intertextuality. When our focus pulls back to examine SubGenius mythology as a whole the weave of intertextuality becomes dense and, though some elements are repeated, new compositions continue to be woven in by creative SubGenii keeping the weave diverse and dynamic. *The Book of the SubGenius* along with *Revelation X* and the *Bobliographon* are all ideal examples of alphabetic and imagic intertextuality according to Barthes' definition,

The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas (Barthes 160).

Into the mythos of the Church of the SubGenius are woven innumerable strands of popular culture, weaving nearly anything and everything from classic horror movies to religious texts, sexuality and advertising slogans (though notably no 'live' brands), literature, science, embodiment, philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics and other mythologies.

SubGenius satire has consistently remained attuned to relevant cultural phenomena with a special focus on religion and cults but ranging from Watergate to Jonestown, from Middle Eastern wars to Heaven's Gate, from Scientology to the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Excerpted from *Hour of Slack* #1475 “Part 2, Radio Synaesthesia Pre-X-Day Special”

the following excerpted discussion grew from a caller’s “Flying Spaghetti Monster” question and exemplifies the spontaneous, relevant, stream-of-connections style of SubGenius humor, here sprinkled with Dr. Hal’s wide-ranging factual interjections.

(Dr. Sinister)

“Hello, you’re on the air.”

(live caller “No Money Mark”)

“Uh...hello SubGenii!”

(Stang)

“We know why we won’t see you at Wisteria...”

(Dr. Hal)

“No money.”

(NMM)

“Yeah, sorry about that, but I did want to ask you something: will the Flying Spaghetti Monster be there?”

(Stang)

“I’m sure he will...he’s one of the biggest fans and butt-kissers of J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs. That Flying Spaghetti Monster was one of the earliest ‘Bobbies.’ We deprogrammed him, we sent him on his way and he’s done pretty well.”

(Dr. Hal)

“Actually it’s a tentacular, undifferentiated mass, dripping with red sauce.”

(Dr. Sinister)

“We’ve all been touched by his noodly appendage.”

(Dr. Hal sings to Alpo dog food tune)

“My god’s bigger than your god, my god’s better than yours.”

(Stang in whiny dullard hillbilly voice)

“Oh ‘em SubGeniuses they just ripped off the Discordians...was first....ripped ‘em off...”

(Dr. Hal)

“These people don’t understand that there is such a thing as ‘prefiguration.’ Just as Apollonius of Tyana prefigured the Christ of the early Christians, so did these early primitive fumbblings manage to suggest...”

(Stang)

“His noodly appendage! Ha-ha,hee-hee!

(Dr. Hal)

“...the refined doctrine which would come later. In fact, which comes terminally, ultimately.”

(Stang)

You know nobody ever accuses us of ripping off The Boo Hoo Bible.
Do you remember that one?

(Dr. Hal)

“What about Art Kleps?”

(Dr. Sinister)

"I have not heard of this Boo Hoo Bible"

(Dr. Hal)

"It was the sacred bible of the hippies years ago.

(Stang)

"Yeah, pre-dated the Discordians..."

(Dr. Hal)

"And the most entertaining book... Art Kleps was the chief Boo Hoo of the Boo Hoos and he wrote the Boo Hoo Bible or compiled it from sacred sources.

(Dr. Sinister)

"What about the Bo-Bo Bible?

(Stang)

"And frankly, for me, the Merry Pranksters were the most influential religious organization, and uh, the Church of the Blinding Light too....

(Dr. Hal)

Either you're on the bus or you're off of the bus.

(Dr. Sinister)

Blinded by the light....(tune)

(Dr. Hal)

Oh blinding light, oh light that blinds, I cannot see, look out for me! Whoa!

(Stang)

Ken Kesey was a SubGenius minister by the way. (00:04:34 – 00:07:00)

YES! REGISTER (ME)

Name (please print) Rev. Ken Kesey

Address 85829 Ridgeway Rd

City/State/Zip Pleasant Hill, OR 97404

Phone (day) 503-747-5196 (evening)

NYESO! I definitely ☒ WILL ☐ WON'T ☐ MIGHT make the SubCon!

I will bring: The Cassady Film

I will need: A ride from the airport to the (sic) gig.

I swear on the sweet name of "Bob" that I have roped in some new Members and thus qualify for the Membership Drive Contest Finals as mentioned in the last PIST.

I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope in which you can mail me details of the Secret Location of the Convention after October 1st.

Binsky's Nuclear Beer

Perhaps inspired by a mix of political exigency and SubGenius modeling, the “Pastafarian Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster” began with an open letter to the Kansas School Board in May 2005 satirically challenging them on a very serious issue:

Let us remember that there are multiple theories of Intelligent Design. I and many others around the world are of the strong belief that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster. It was He who created all that we see and all that we feel. We feel strongly that the overwhelming scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but a coincidence, put in place by Him.

(website)

A quick look at the Pastafarian website reveals a comic frame approach and many similarities to the SubGenius model: the Pastafarians offer their own ordination certificate complete with gold foil seal embossed with Flying Spaghetti Monster logo, a variety of swag for sale and like the Church of the SubGenius, overt rejection of dogma is a central concern. Originally founded to push back against fundamentalist supported “intelligent design” educational legislation in Kansas, today, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster includes people of all faiths and none. According to their website, “we are not anti-religion, we are anti- crazy nonsense done in the name of religion. There is a big difference.”

The “crazy nonsense done in the name of religion” could comprise a long and growing list, but in *Hour of Slack* #595 “Slamming Heaven’s Gate” Rev. Stang works through his satire of the ritualized suicide of Heaven’s Gate cult members while offering, via Jonestown joke, the Church of the SubGenius as a way to avoid such an ending.

Oh yes, it’s true dear friends, I am a mocker. I’m a mocker and I am guilty of having made callous fun of the 39 dead geeks. But you know, their farewell

statements on video begged us not to make a big deal of how tragic it all is. They went not only willingly, but eagerly. And it has always been the mission of “Bob’s” Church to get you to the punchline alive and we don’t mean the Jonestown punchline. (31:46 – 32:20)

Though Stang openly and unapologetically admits to mocking a tragedy but he reminds us of their videos discouraging grief and then gives a quick plug for “Bob’s’ Church” and the mission of “getting you to the punchline alive” being careful to clarify the nature of the SubGenius punchline. Stang’s reflexive rhetoric keeps his satire from becoming unidirectional and bitter; his admission of callousness gains him membership in the Human Foibles Club helps to authorize his subsequent critique. Strategic or sincere, Burke would see this move as self-aware, a reflexive willingness to grow.

The comic frame of acceptance but carries to completion the translative act. It considers human life as a project in 'composition,' where the poet works with materials of social relationships. Composition, translation, also 'revision,' hence offering maximum opportunity for the resources of *criticism*. (ATH 173)

Reflecting on his context in a predominantly Christian country, in the extended citation below Stang reverses the direction of his criticism from the easy target of the Heaven’s Gate suicides to mainstream culture and the more formidable targets of mainstream media, fundamentalist Christianity and mainstream religions in general.

Without pretending to have the answer, Stang’s narrative concludes with the important realization that we are all subject to conditioned responses that may not serve our best interests.

Though the primary mode of SubGenius expression is satirical, *Hour of Slack* episodes often include brief non-comic commentary in response to a public tragedy such as group suicide.

I want to talk about the cult that makes Heaven's Gate look harmless. And I ain't talkin' about Church of the SubGenius because more disgusting than mockers like me or dumbasses like the Heaven's Gate people are the pompous, pious, pink pundits that are oozin' out of every op-ed page and talk show indulging in a *veritable orgy* of self-congratulation about how sane and normal they are and their 'good' religion....The biggest difference between Heaven's Gate and mainstream Christianity friends, is that the Heaven's Gate people *never tried to brainwash my kids*.... Heaven's Gate people didn't feel they had to take over a dozen radio and TV stations here in the Dallas alone. They didn't have to have entire cable networks devoted to their particular superstition. And so they shunned sex? Millions of Christians called Nuns, Priests and losers are the same way. So thirty-nine of 'em killed themselves. At least they didn't kill millions of non-believers, burn all them witches, torture freethinkers and so forth and so on. So the cultists think some spaceship full of gods is gonna come save 'em. Well, Christians, Jews, Muslims and just about everybody else believes in an Invisible Monster that will help you out if you kiss its Almighty Invisible Butt. And why do they believe all this? Why? 'Cause they *read it in a book* – or some really sincere person told 'em all about it. And just listen to these Pinks drone on and on and on, worse than I'm doin' now, about 'those poor deluded cultists' as if they themselves were somehow *any different*. (33:26 – 35:53)

A critical awareness of the conditioning influence of cultural narratives and their various sources, motives and results exemplifies a high level of the reflexivity that is a central practical value of Burke's comic frame. A similar, more satirical critique of credulity, textuality and religious duplicity introduces their *Revelation X* with explicit instructions: "HOW TO USE THIS BOOK: It works like any holy book that's **worth a damn**. You can find something in it to excuse you for anything, or to prove any point – indeed, any number of mutually contradictory points" (vi), selective literalism and decontextualized scriptural citation are traits that seem to be present more in the religious reader than the text itself.

Rather than attempting any pretense at "having the answer", the Church of the SubGenius again admits its fictional status and its pioneering impact having "inadvertently spawned" most of the other "funny fake churches" that mock institutional religion and cults. Without denying their artifice, the Church of the SubGenius purports to be superior to other "fake churches" in their willingness to "go the distance, cross the line and become replacements" for institutional religion and cults.

There are plenty of 'funny fake churches' around these days. We're not one of those, although we *have* inadvertently spawned most of them. They're only making fun of organized religion and fringe cults; none of them go the distance, cross the line and become replacements for those things...Other religions keep trying to force the natural contradictions of life into making some sort of SENSE! And that is the ultimate folly. The apparent contradictions you find in 'Bob's' Teachings are precisely what allow it to operate (vi).

The concluding claim that the "apparent contradictions" in the teachings of "Bob" are "precisely what allow it to operate" is both counterintuitive and an observable

phenomenon in many institutions, religious or not. Mixed within the sprawling, ever-mutating satirical expressions of the Church of the SubGenius are some gems of wisdom, serious observations about human behavior, knowledge, power and group identity that are, like the gems in Burke's even larger rhetorical sprawl, keenly relevant and well worth the effort of mining the labyrinth.

B) Economics/Consumerism

“Offer it, and they will buy. – J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs” (*Revelation X ix*)



If America is associated with anything, it is consumerism and corporate branding. Today the sun never sets on the empire of Coca-Cola and McDonalds. The ubiquity, subtle sophistication and increasing invasiveness of consumer propaganda has been observed by scholars from Aldous Huxley and Vance Packard in the 1950s to contemporary media theorists like Sut Jhally, Noam Chomsky and Douglas Rushkoff. In 1958 Huxley notes the

indispensability of advertising in *Brave New World Revisited* “under a free enterprise system commercial propaganda by any and every means is absolutely indispensable. But the indispensable is not necessarily the desirable. What is demonstrably good in the sphere of economics may be far from good for men and women as voters or even as human beings” (32). In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent awareness of an historic wealth gap, a spark of awareness is glowing in the American mind regarding the realities behind the messaging.

As part of a larger satirical critique of materialism and consumer culture the career of J.R. “Bob” Dobbs is that of a salesman, and “Bob” can sell anything to anyone. And it is specifically his sales ability that SubGenius end-of-the-world narrative credits with having the potential to save Earth from the X-ist aliens who want to destroy us. “Bob” is a salesman on our behalf, who uses his ability to attract money to inspire SubGenii to follow his accidental luck-drawing path of Slack.

The SubGenius *Arise* recruitment video explains the concept of Slack this way:

True slack is, by definition, indefinable. It is a kind of direct perception unfettered by common sense. It is not mere laziness. It is rather a kind of active sloth...Slack is different for each person. One might call it something for nothing. But the normals, the mediocretans, the somnambulacs and pseudo-subslands have tried to make it something that we have been led to believe we must work to buy. It is this yearning for slack that separates us from the normals. The human may live out his entire life in a grinding cycle of slacklessness, his hours consumed by meaningless toil interspersed with meaningless leisure, yet he never feels cheated. He thinks it is natural.

It may be that Thoreau was acting as a proto-SubGenius by seeking a life of Slack and pitying the Slackless life of his neighbors when he wrote in *Walden*:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation....A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

But in spite of our valorization of these unexpectedly productive moments of leisure, the overarching value in American culture is not only work, but a kind of patriotic frenzy of effort to gain a few moments of what we could have had all along for free. Burke seems to understand the psychology that connects allegiance to an economic model that precludes significant enjoyment of the deeply held personal values with which it is often associated:

...when an average compatriot expresses his allegiance to *capitalism*, he is not considering merely the things that make it *different* from other economic systems. The symbol also includes for him such notions as family, friendship, neighborliness, education, medicine, golf, tools, sunlight, future, and endless other such sundries (*ATH* 99).

Revelation X radically challenges the Protestant work ethic as “Satanic” noting its deadly impact on “our little terrarium Earth,” our profiteering overproduction resulting in a planet that will become “a toxic toilet soul farm” leaving those who “sold *cheap* to the Conspiracy” to rue the years of their lives wasted, “with nothing to show for them but lots of paid household bills” where we will just “get older and older, and develop more and more chronic aches, pains and

regrets, and when you die, the Con at large will just say, ‘Well, there’s *plenty* more where *that* one came from.’” (*Revelation X* 26).

In *Counter Statement* Burke observes how “the conversion of pure science into applied science has made the practical a menace.” A contemporary application of this insight might involve how Smartphones allow us to tightly schedule our social lives, but also to be tracked, to be accessible to our employer at all hours and even to have our hectic lives managed by a pleasant digital assistant. Burke sees a fun and viable avenue of escape from such mechanization in artistic expression, “the aesthetic becomes a means of reclamation. Insofar as mechanization increases the complexity of the social structure...the aesthetic must serve as anti-mechanization, the corrective of the practical” (110-111).

The values and practices Burke associates with the aesthetic or “Bohemian” corrective include many we generally disparage in America but which SubGenii celebrate and may be worth deeper consideration:

inefficiency, indolence, dissipation, vacillation, mockery, distrust,
‘hypochondria,’ non-conformity...experimentalism, curiosity, risk, dislike of
propaganda, dislike of certainty – tentative attitude towards all manners of
thinking which reinforce the natural dogmatism of the body (111-112).

While it is abundantly evident that we verbally valorize “non-conformity, experimentalism, curiosity, risk” in actual practice these tendencies are actively schooled out and often subtly discouraged in the workplace such that the rare individual who tenaciously engages in such subversive and necessary behaviors is at first excommunicated, but in the resulting freedom often achieves a greatness that institutional encrustation would not allow, and our digital age has provided a pantheon of examples.

According to *Revelation X*, SubGenii “demand freedom to fail, freedom from Work, and freedom of religion – OUR religion!” A sense of their satirical commentary on the nexus of American patriotism and economics is the title they coin for their own economic theory “Patriopsychotic Anarchomaterialism” defined as a political party that is “the rejection of ALL PARTIES” but also a concept whose meaning can be revised as needed by the SubGenius (ix).

SubGenius satirical treatment of our consumer culture comes in many forms and the first to be noticed is the hyperbolic, instant-answer, easy success, short-cut scripted formulas so prevalent in American commercial marketing and in the growing “Prosperity Gospel” movement. The first episode of *Hour of Slack* provides several examples:

(manic sales voice)

Now at last the step-by-step process is revealed! This is IT – the only faith that promises action, thrills, success in sex *and* business. Bring your weirdest dreams to rampaging life, stand erect for your own abnormality!

(monster voice)

“Bob” is a way of life to millions yet half of ‘em don’t even know it!

He’s the One True Living Slack Master with the spiritual know-how to help you bash through the locked doorway to financial heaven. He’s the one real short-cut to Slack (01:54-02:29).

Such rhetoric is also present in one of the more famous slogans of the Church of the SubGenius “Eternal Salvation or Triple Your Money Back!” Enthusiastic, affirmative sales slogans mix with honest admissions that “‘BOB’ is not the Answer and neither is anything else” to remind readers of a more serious subtext, though SubGenii are careful to avoid taking themselves and their “illusion of creativity” too seriously as can be seen in another selection from

Hour of Slack #1:

Now, see another dimension on your TeeVee. Yes, fear the Stark Fist of Removal no longer. Become physically attractive overnight! Attain status, luck, prosperity by...blowing them off. “Bob’s” promise is to widen the scope and nature of abnormal behavior, to explore new ways of going over the edge, and coming right back...To help you create the highest possible earnings from the psychodynamics of abnormality. To turn conspiracy-implanted personality disorders around and channel them into an illusion of creativity that will fool normals and get you sex.
(02:33 - 03:22)

In a surprise reversal from what might be expected of a shameless group of self-professed heretics and mockers, in *Hour of Slack #1439* Rev. Stang rants about the value of the family, the primary driving force of a consumer economy in our current economic model.

Friend, the Devil is tearing the family apart. But what the Devil uses to do it with is 9 to 5 jobs, conspiracy, corporate, pink situations where mommy and daddy get up in the morning and go to work...they kiss the kids good bye, it’s the first time they see ‘em during the day, kiss them goodbye, kind of a simultaneous goodbye and hello. Then they get home about 7:00 ticked off (to use the polite term) after a long drive back out to the suburbs. They get home, they kiss their kids hello and goodnight and they go to bed. And the other churches dare to say the breakdown in the family is ‘cause the kids see a little tittering stupid sexy gags on television, or ‘cause of the new permissiveness where men are allowed to do things with other men. That’s a bunch of HOLY HOOEY I say my friend. I say why not legalize pornography and ban work! Work is what takes the parents away from

the kids. Most of these kids these days grow up, they don't have parents, they got some kind of robot scarecrows....oh friend, let there be Slack. (09:03 – 10:05)

The “robot scarecrow” is a potent image, a mechanical being whose sole purpose is to protect material abundance. Our Taylorized economy leaves little room for quality family time other than regular shopping that keeps us on that hello/goodbye treadmill with our family. Unless we carefully schedule it in, we rarely have leisure for unstructured creative play, not to mention time for significant reflection about our personal values and the values of our culture.

What replaces those insights gained from reflection is an endless barrage of heavily funded, well-researched corporate messaging, logos and advertising that are meant to stimulate consumption by evoking a sense of dissatisfaction with self-image or material comfort, a desire for the featured product and create a sense of affinity, if not affection, for the corporation. The increasingly muscular Corporate Person even has marketing wizards advocating the deployment of cultic tactics to fix lifelong brand loyalty.

In Douglas Atkin's 2004 book *The Culting of Brands: Turn Your Customers into True Believers*, the introduction begins unashamedly with two bold claims: “1. Brands are the new religion. 2. Cults are a rich and legitimate source of insight for the creation of brand worship” (xi). In case the casual reader does not grasp the radical nature of these claims, a few pages later Atkins articulates it further with italic emphasis: “The position of this book is that *cults are a good thing, that cults are normal*, and that people join them for *very good reasons*.” Then, in an oddly counterproductive move for his argument, Atkins evokes the very images he does not want us to envision when he invites us to “suspend any prejudice that may be derived from vivid pictures of mass suicides and burning compounds...”(xix). For anyone alive during the Jonestown and Branch Davidian cult catastrophes it is hard to imagine deliberate promotion of

cultic thinking and behavior but with each generation, fewer and fewer learn of problematic nature of uncritical devotion – religious, political or economic.

SubGenius resistance to control by rigid structure and fixed systems may be wise; many have been the horrific results of imposed regimes of hyper-efficiency and over-organization. Skipping the obvious 20th century examples of regimented horror, Burke reminds us of the impact on American development when we traded the potentials of cultural and creative diversity for an economically efficient uniformity.

We too had imposed a rationally perfect frame, in slaughtering the Indians instead of making a new cultural amalgamation with their non-commercial collectivities. Here, however, it was not a feudal conqueror, but the capitalist system that imposed its flat decree (*ATH* 146).

A salient difference between the systematic imposition of incorporated profit and indigenous “non-commercial collectivities” is likely a question of leisure time available for “unprofitable” creative play – no time for frivolity when there are profits to be made.

The following passage from *Revelation X* chapter 2 “The Conspiracy,” emphasizes the nexus of profit and pollution and contains a classic religious reference to “Satan Incarnate” affording the opportunity for brief hermeneutical analysis of the passage and the potential validity of the charge.

*We don't seriously expect **ANYONE** to understand Dobbs, and
WHOEVER CLAIMS TO IS LYING!... No, we're not supposed to even know that
THE ADVERSARY is not some grimy weirdo cranking out crackpot rants in a
filthy attic, or a Cult Leader wearing Mystic Symbols on an afternoon TV talk
show. We're not supposed to know... THAT **SATAN INCARNATE** ISN'T A*

*HIDEOUS ABOMINATION FROM **HELL**. BUT A CLEAN-SCRUBBED, PINK-FACED, WIDE-GRINNED, NECKTIE-WEARING GOODNATURED TRUSTWORTHY SOUL WHO IS POCKETING HUGE AMOUNTS OF CASH FOR POISONING AND MURDERING MILLIONS, saying, 'WE HAVE NO SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT THE TENFOLD ESCALATION OF HORRIBLE DEATH IN THE DIRECT VICINITY OF OUR PLANT HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE **BLACK SLUDGE LEAKING OUT OF OUR WASTE DUMP INTO THE PLAYGROUND OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL!!!!**' No, we're not supposed to know that, BUT WE **DO** KNOW IT, and once you know something YOU CAN'T **UNKNOWN** IT NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO. YOU CAN ONLY SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE WISHING YOU COULD FORGET!!!*

(Revelation X 15).



Though we need not cite them here, similar environmental catastrophes have become frequent in our media diet. Like any good religious zealot, the Church of the SubGenius occasionally invokes the name of Satan to “explain” evil in the world. In the passage above, they provide a surprising counter-reading of Satan and some rhetorical review that ensures its place in our memory and increases the story’s contemporary relevance. Since a 2009 Harris Poll found that 60% of those polled believed in a literal Satan, it might be worth a brief review of a central verse cited in the composition of the Satanic narrative, to examine whether equating Satan with a pleasant but avaricious Salesman is unwarranted hyperbole and unfounded demonization as some might reasonably object.

In the Old Testament, the orthodox narrative of Satan is partly derived from Ezekiel 28, though the context clearly indicates the Prince of Tyre is the subject of the chapter (28:2). In verse 16 the specific crime of this Prince is described: “*By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou has sinned...*” The Hebrew for the word “merchandise” here is “rekullah” (07404) meaning trade or peddling and the Hebrew for “violence” in this passage is “chamac” (02555) meaning “unjust gain” according to *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*. While it may seem extreme to say that criminal corporations are “Satan Incarnate” there may be some Biblical support for this – heretical though it may be in our Mammon-driven culture. If Ezekiel 28:16 is about Satan, it is suggested that he is a cheating businessman or salesman, a description that could fit the corporate pollution described above in *Revelation X* – a description quite similar to what happened at Love Canal, New York in the 1970s.

But to maintain the comic perspective, the SubGenius must not only satirize the smiling profiteer polluter, he must include himself in the blame as a member of the human race as

achieved in this alien farmer narrative. The colonial plan portrays the survivors, the strongest human seeds for the next planet to be as “the most ruthless ones” not only because they survived, but also because they would be the most efficient at producing the “cornucopia of synthetic poisons the aliens crave.

Over the eons, aliens have been seeding planets across the Universe with humans...There is tremendous intergalactic demand for planets having atmospheres ripe with deadly hydrocarbons, pollution and heavy metal contaminants. It was long ago and far away discovered that if one takes a nice, virgin, carbon-oxygen planet of the right specifications, puts a few thousand humans on it, and leaves it alone for a couple of hundred thousand years, upon return it will be a wonderfully contaminated hell-planet, a veritable cornucopia of synthetic poisons. The aliens then transfer the few surviving humans, the most ruthless ones, to a fresh planet to begin the process anew (*Revelation X 11*).

In addition to the nuclear threat, Burke was also concerned with the environment and promoted a broader ecosystemic perspective over the predominant economics of efficient exploitation. Though some conspiracy theorists question the growing evidence of climate change, Burke seems to have had an advanced perspective about human environmental impact and its inevitable consequences.

Ecology....teaches us that the *total* economy of this planet cannot be guided by an efficient rationale of exploitation alone, but that the exploiting part must itself eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the *balance* of the whole...so far the laws of ecology have begun avenging themselves against restricted human

concepts of profit by countering deforestation and deep plowing with floods, droughts, dust storms, and aggravated soil erosion (*ATH* 150 note).

Today, over 70 years later, these insights are at the forefront of global discussion as we attempt to switch from a dominant but unsustainable model to one that demonstrates reflexivity, experimentation and evolution to dramatically new paradigms. However this switch will not be easy, distracted and misinformed as we are by “the spectacle [that] is the present model of socially dominant life.”

Burke’s description of the “socially dominant” model of his day observes “the ravages of boredom and inanition that go with the 'alienations' of contemporary society” which are due partially to the nature of employment in a laissez-fair capitalist economy. In *ATH* Burke outlines the misery of competing for early 20th Century jobs that demanded “sedentary regimentation and grotesque devotion” leading to a dissatisfied alienation. And if we consider the impact of digital technologies, many of today’s jobs have become even more sedentary, regimented - and monitored.

In the June 2014 edition of *The Wall Street Journal* online Lauren Weber summarizes a 2013 survey of worker satisfaction with employment:

from wages and retirement plans to vacation policies and commutes—workers are less content with their jobs than they were in 1987, when the research group started tracking the topic. Back then, 61.1% of workers said they were satisfied with their work.

The Conference Board Inc. is a research organization that has been conducting employee satisfaction surveys since 1987, and their 2013 survey found that fewer than half of the 1,673 workers surveyed were content with their job (Weber). The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index study of

over 30,000 college graduates found that, of those employed full time by an employer, only 39% felt engaged in the workplace (Gallup). Though much has changed since Burke wrote *Attitudes*, it seems that his insights here are, if anything, more relevant than ever.

The barren and benumbing life Burke describes is much like the Conspiracy life that the SubGenius seeks to evade, a cultural conspiracy promoting “regimentation and grotesque devotion” to unfulfilling work. Creatively countering this cultural conformity is the SubGenius as described by Dr. Howll in a 2004 sermon: “Yes, Sublings, *a true SubGenius* is one *who acts under his own genius, or her own genius*, rather than at the behest of the Conspiracy. That’s right, *the Conspiracy*” (*Bobliographon* 129, markup in original). Dr. Howll goes on to trace the etymology of “conspiracy” to the Latin for “to breathe together” suggesting that many have an unconscious allegiance to the Conspiracy that opposes the Slack the SubGenius requires. Though there are many aspects to Slack, Dr. Howll defines its value, like the Temporary Autonomous Zone, in terms of a sacred space for creative expression, saying that Slack is

the opposite of tension. Slack is *leisure*, leisure the *basis of culture*. Only *after* securing food and escaping that persistent bellowing Mammoth, the **Cave Man** can sit down and invent the wheel or discover how to generate Fire....***Only in leisure can you figure out the next neat thing there is to be, not*** while you are enmeshed in the tentacular tubes of the Conspiracy, at your meaningless ‘job.’ *Everything worthwhile that was ever created was given birth during the sacred Slack Time* (129). (markup in original)

So, with the charge to resist Conspiracy enslavement and actively seek the presence of Slack, the SubGenius mantra “repent, quit your job and slack off” seems an echo of Leary’s “turn on, tune in and drop out” but without the chemical inspiration. Instead, the SubGenius challenge to

“repent” is to turn around, to go in the opposite direction of wage-slavery, the spectacle of commodity and its homogenizing, leisure-robbing lifestyle. But rather than being expressed in protest, the repentance of the SubGenius is expressed by making time for elaborate, playful, satirical creativity.





B) Conspiracy

“It is gettin’ awfully crowded up there on the grassy knoll.”

Hour of Slack #797

For the SubGenius, the word “conspiracy” has multiple applications. When capitalized as “The Conspiracy” it refers to cultural pressure to conform to the consumer norm, to act/look/think in a “normal” way and the growing tendency for human experience to become commoditized so that, what was our free birthright of unmediated direct experience can now be neatly packaged and sold back to us for a profit. In SubGenius Pamphlet #1 the word is introduced as an acronym: “C.O.N.S.P.I.R.A.C.Y.!!

Cliques Of Normals Secretly Planning Insidious Rituals Aimed at Controlling You.”

As *Revelation X* explains, our current global crises are no accident, and all conspiracies are inextricably interwoven

Things didn't just 'get' this way. Not even *humans* could cause this much trouble, by *accident*. It had to have been PLANNED.

It's a CONSPIRACY. It is THE Conspiracy.

BUT, WHICH CONSPIRACY?

Is it the people who assassinated JFK and MLK? Or is it the Masons? Or the Satanists? Is it the MJ-12 Crashed UFOs conspiracy, or the Alternative 3 conspiracy? Is it fluoride in the water, the Watergate burglars, the International Jewish Bankers? What about those who killed Jimi, Janis, Jim an G.G.? And John? And Paul? And Kurt?Most of those can be tied in to the basic CIA conspiracy, but....what about the liberal media conspiracy? How is it they're *owned* by Westinghouse, G.E., and other parts of the *conservative* conspiracy? But then, all conspiracies are so interlocked and interwoven that when you start looking into one, you inevitably end up being sucked into another and another....(*Revelation X 17*)

Considering the etymology of "conspire" as "breathing together," the ad slogans and marketing tunes we can all repeat are a kind of breathing together with those corporate persons whose primary legal obligation is profit. In this sense, the "conspiracy" of maximizing profit via decreased costs, mass production and mass marketing is not a secret plan, corporations unapologetically pledge themselves to the primacy of profit, but in marketing they do breathe together their field-tested magical words that elicit sales and support.

At the same time it critiques the "Conspiracy" of consumer conditioning, the Church of the SubGenius satirizes the phenomenon of irrational conspiracy theory in its own mythology by paralleling JFK's assassination with several "assassinations" of "Bob", Lovecraftian Elder Gods,

UFOs and alien beings, magic powers and Yeti origins. The Illuminati are a regular conspiracy reference in SubGenius literature and performance, a topic Robert Anton Wilson expanded upon in his *Illuminatus!* trilogy. It may be that these playful conspiracy jabs have contributed to the resurgence of “Illuminatiphobia” in the wake of Ruby Ridge, Waco, the “New World Order” and more recently right-wing talk radio. In a rough snapshot of the intensity of this fear, a Google search of the phrase “Illuminati conspiracy” gives 42,600,000 results and on YouTube the same phrase gathered 2,020,000 hits.

In *Pranksters*, McLeod discusses how many of the conspiracy theories of today began long ago as pranks and here suggests that a flaw in many conspiracy theories is the assumption of “impossibly perfect” communication naming the Illuminati as one of the oldest, most enduring of conspiracy theories:

Conspiracy theories are often organized around an impossibly perfect model of communication... The West’s most resilient conspiracy theory can be traced back to 1614... This ‘Invisible Brotherhood’ created the blueprint for a paranoid worldview that is centered around a satanic plot to create a New World Order.
(McLeod 20-21)

This specific fear of world government comes, at least in part, from currently orthodox cataclysmic readings of the book of Revelations that were influenced in the early 1820’s by John Nelson Darby, inventor of the concept of “the Rapture” and an advocate of the doctrine of “dispensationalism” that sees the Bible and subsequent history as a series of specific dispensations or arrangements with Jehovah. Here is where the categories of “conspiracy” and “eschatology” demonstrate a Venn overlap.

Darby actively promoted the doctrine of a premillennial dispensation in which Christ and the New Jerusalem will only come after years of tribulation intensified by the antichrist, ruler of a one-world government. Prior to Darby, the predominant eschatology was postmillennial a doctrine that taught Jesus and the Kingdom would arrive only after the world had already been won by organized acts of Christian love (Sutherland). Aiding in this eschatological reversal were the horrors of the Civil War, a carnage that crushed the tenability of postmillennial hope. This apocalyptic premillennial eschatology is one area of SubGenius satire where the categories “conspiracy” and “eschatology” exhibit a Venn overlap.

While one world government, Illuminati and “end-of-the-world” conspiracies are regular fare in SubGenius satire, the central conspiracy that concerns the Church of the SubGenius is that comprised of the welter of pressures to produce and the conscription to conform to gain rank through mundane daily obeisance:

The conspiracy that we truly hate, the *real* Conspiracy, isn't one of those fiendishly *clever* ones. It doesn't even *know* it's a conspiracy. It can't. It's a faceless confederacy of dunces, so vast and so broad that it underlies all the lesser conspiracies and permeates all human reality. Quite the opposite of devious, it dominates by merely exploiting the overall, mealy-mouthed, chickenbutt-kissing 'Code of Normality' (or **CON**) of ALL the Pinks, norm-worms and mere-humes at large....More than anything else, The Conspiracy is an *attitude* – a *fear* – a PINKNESS. A cancer of the imagination, the hatred of the real, the yearning for 'cuteness,' the eagerness to obey...and the lack of TRUE faith in “Bob” Dobbs!...This fear of the unfamiliar permeates society; it's what lets the Con get away with REAL MURDER on a massive scale...The obvious injustices and

insanities written into law books by Illuminati bigwigs are insignificant compared to the *little things* – the unspoken agreement with the status quo, the unthinking daily cowardices, the petty subtle put-downs, the judgmental gossip and all the mundane venalities that make up *human nature*...(Revelation X 17)

Again, we have the necessary comic self-reflection that includes the joker in the cast of faulty human behavior – as Burke would remind us, the “polemical-debunking” frame would only alienate the audience.

Well outweighing the more serious critiques of conformity conspiracy are the satirical jabs the Church of the SubGenius takes at our current crop of conspiracy theorists whose concerns range from the imagined “dictatorship” of President Obama to world domination by the Illuminati as in this excerpt from *Hour of Slack* #1470

(Stang)

So...the Conspiracy goes deep. And the cops, of course, are working for Obama Minions and Obama Minions work for Obama, and Obama works for the Illuminati and the Illuminati works for the Conspiracy, and the Conspiracy is working for JHVH-1 the Alien Space God from Corporate Sin Galaxy...as everyone knows.

Stop snoring SLEEPLE!

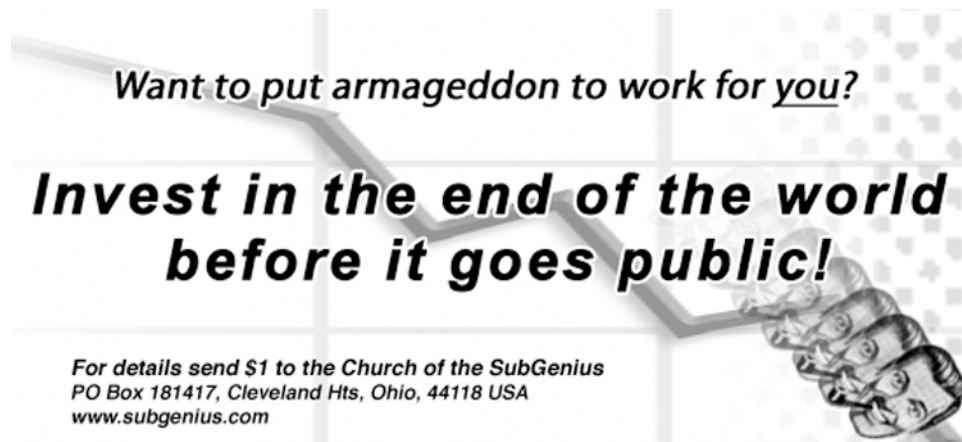
Stang keeps the SubGenius concept of Conspiracy fresh with his satire on those conspiracy theorists that believe mass shootings like Sandy Hook are part of an elaborate Obama/Illuminati hoax to seize guns and invoke martial law for the New World Order. Stang develops this satirical jab with a lengthy fictional narrative, told as if it actually happened, about being spied upon by

“Obama’s minions” which apparently includes Google. In the aftermath of NSA spying revelations, the comic frame faces a greater challenge in satirizing conspiracy theories, but its impact is likely more positive than the polemics of debunking.

A brief review of some of the 5,420,000 “New World Order” YouTube videos reveals that many of the conspiracy theories fearful of UN Governance involve references to Satan or Satanic images. Burke saw a similar approach in his own day:

Nineteenth-century rejection frames abounded in satanistic elements. And many of our contemporary agitators, in their bellicose zeal that obviously defeats its propagandist purposes, seem similarly affected...(ATH 100).

As a rhetorical strategy, conspiracy theories are rank with “satanistic elements” but as Burke notes, such a “rejection frame” undermines itself, just like the polemical-debunking approach.



D) Eschatology

‘Civilization,’ for all its fancy trimmings, is still just a rickety shack made by a drunk stooge without a blueprint, *a shack that will collapse* when you least expect it. The foundation was okay, but there has been some *very sloppy workmanship*.
(Revelation X 16)

The OED tells us that word eschatology was first used in an 1844 theological text and originally referred to the four last events in the Christian life: death, judgment, heaven and hell - though its Greek roots denote only the study of discourse. Contemporary understanding of the term focuses more on the “end times” judgment aspect of the definition.

Sitting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus’ disciples would ask him to tell them when the end of the world would come, and in Matthew 24:36 he answers emphatically “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.” Nevertheless Christians since the first century have expected and predicted immanent apocalypse. American history contains a long list of failed predictions, and in the past century a few American fundamentalist and evangelical Christian preachers have made a lucrative industry out of predicting the end of the world while their true believers sold their homes and possessions, often becoming destitute in the process. Satirizing this cycle of apocalyptic expectation is one of the central themes of the Church of the SubGenius. Rather than being an outdated topic, apocalyptic fever has become a renewed American industry from religious tribulationists to secular doomsday preppers.

In a recent example from 2011, Family Radio Network preacher Harold Camping made two separate, widely publicized “end of the world” predictions (May 21 & October 21) blaming his May date error on a miscalculation, according to NPR’s Mark Memmot (“‘Rapture’ Prophet”). When the world did not end on October 21, Camping repented of his predictions in March of 2012, the year of the Mayan Calendar apocalypse, another failed doomsday prediction that spawned its own lucrative industry for the New Age set.

Not to be dissuaded by biblical prohibitions, millennia of failed predictions, Camping's failures or even the failure of the Mayan 2012 apocalypse, the Rev. John Hagee has picked up on the profitability of end-times predictions with his book *Four Blood Moons: Something is About to Change*, recently #18 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. While some might object that he should be spared criticism because his beliefs are genuine, it is reasonable to wonder why the books are not being widely distributed for free if the world is really about to end.



Taking a cue from Jonestown suicide drills, CoSG members gathered on July 5th for two years before their 1998 apocalypse for a SubGenius-style “drill,” (minus the tub of poison) involving plenty of silliness and celebration of life.

X-Day Drill July 5, 1997



Gleefully joining in the eschatological shenanigans, the Church of the SubGenius invented its own end of the world scenario called “X-Day” which has become one of the central tenets of the Church of the SubGenius. On X-Day, July 5, 1998, the end-of-the-world was to arrive in the form of aliens destroying everyone except the faithful “dues-paying” SubGenii who had been saved in a secret deal worked out by the slick sales magic of “Bob.”

(Unidentified Host) According to church doctrine, on July 5, 1998 when the television signal of Amos ‘n Andy reaches the men from Planet X, the aliens will unleash their wrath upon the Earth. ‘The men from Planet X are going to come down and take over planet Earth. They’re going to...’

(Stang) ‘They will put us, they will put us out of our misery unless “Bob” can explain to them in ways that they can understand that there is something on Earth worth saving.’

“And only the SubGenii, the dues-paying, book-buying, receipt-in-the-pocket, paid-in-full to the Church of the SubGenii have the tiniest prayer of survival.

The rest of ‘em? It’s a tough world Jack. (*Hour of Slack* #1387)

The key elements of eschatology are there: limited time until judgment, the decreasing opportunity for salvation and the limited number of the saved, themes that have echoed at least since Jonathan Edwards’ 1741 sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” warning of “sudden and unexpected destruction” for the wicked. The SubGenius version of this deploys similar tactics satirically.

Remember, things *could* be *much, much* worse. That’s the *consolation*. You could SUDDENLY, ONE MINUTE FROM NOW, be screaming, in unimaginable pain,

half burned to death and trapped inside the white-hot twisted metal and broken glass and charred wood of wherever you are when IT happens...(Revelation X 26)

The Church of the SubGenius has ritualized their entire “X-Day” end-of-the-world mythos. Boldly satirizing the Jonestown poison-drills, they began yearly “drills” for X-Day as early as 1996. On July 5 of 1998, though dozens and dozens of SubGenii converged to wait for the saucers, there was no true expectation of alien rescue - but there were plans for the first X-Day party, now an annual ritual for the Church of the SubGenius (a brilliant ritual reversal of catastrophic expectations).

Two weeks after the unfulfilled end of the world, the Rev. Stang offered an explanation unlike those given by most end-times prophets, a portion of which was broadcast on *Hour of Slack* #1437:

Friends, I wasn't supposed to be here today. I was planning, like every other SubGenius, to be on the escape vessels of the Sex Goddesses...I believe [in] Occam's Razor...which says the simplest explanation is usually the best: “Bob” fucked up....

Sure, our prophecy may not have come true, maybe “Bob” fucked up that one time, but you know what? We're religious nuts!

We don't care! “Bob” could fuck up a hundred times and we'd still show up here at Brushwood waitin' for those flyin' saucers.....and havin' a helluva party!

(10:38-11:10,13:00-13:22)

As a church of heretics, it is fitting that they blame their deity and that they do so in vulgar street slang, but the reflexivity of Burke's comic frame is evident in the admission that a hundred failures of “Bob” would not matter because “we're religious nuts” simultaneously owning and

satirizing the common human foible of blind faith, though separating with a pause in delivery, their own celebratory rather than apocalypse-oriented motive for return.



Using the premillennial tribulation and rapture concept promoted by John Nelson Darby, *Hour of Slack* #1378 “The Day The World Didn’t End” features Rev. Stang describing the X-Day expectancy of SubGenii who set up their lawn chairs, beer in hand, to await the what they call “the Rapture”:

they *meditate* friends on what it’s gonna be like when those men from Planet X come down and destroy the normal people on this planet and take the weird abnormals and eccentrics and those of us who have to live in disguise as a human and lift us up, up and away into the Escape Vessels of the Sex Goddesses. And that’s what our religion is all about. (08:05-08:28)

Such a comic frame perspective on “the end of the world” tinkers with the symbols of religion, UFOs and passive consumerism and pokes fun at all of it. Though the SubGenius motive is primarily creative play, their spoof apocalypse and its subsequent yearly X-Day anniversary

multi-day party might be an effective inoculation against the spell of apocalyptic religious visions and hopes of magical deliverance from the chaos.



SubGenius “Rupture” version of fundamentalist rapture postcard (SubG Archives)

Though he does not specifically connect the nuclear threat to religious apocalypse, Burke’s 1955 introduction to *Attitudes Toward History* acknowledges the technical potential for “the rapid obliteration of all human life” what he terms “an easily available possibility” (v). Instead of being a soberly eliminated threat, it looms even larger at the dawn of the 21st Century for a combination of technological and religious reasons.

In January of 2014, our faith in the complex human and technical systems that control the 4000+ American nuclear warhead arsenal was most recently violated upon the revelation of cheating and drug-use scandals among a group of launch officers at a missile silo in Montana. The year before, Eric Schlosser published his six year long investigation of nuclear weapon system malfunctions and human blunders in his book *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident and the Illusion of Safety* where the central sobering narrative focuses on

a 1980 explosion at an Arkansas nuclear missile silo that contained a Titan II missile with a W-53 warhead over 500 times the destructive power of the “Little Boy” dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Though nuclear concerns get relatively little public discussion these days, clearly the issue is far from trivial and any individual or group that draws it into public discussion is doing a rare but important service.

Framing this stark reality in a comic frame, in *Hour of Slack* #803 broadcast on 9/11, Stang responds to a guest’s observation that the results of the attack will involve more than AK-47s: “No but the next one will be fought with rock-and-stick my friend! This one might be fought with germ warfare and terrorism and nuclear smart bomb attacks, but the next one will be rock-and-stick!!” (00:18:27-00:18:45) An affirmation of this threat and a frank articulation of the issues involved is delivered by Bill Maher in his 2008 documentary *Religulous*, as he stands in the Valley of Megiddo where, according to contemporary readings of Revelation, the end of the world could begin at any moment:

If the world does come to an end here, or wherever, or if it limps into the future, decimated by the effects of religion-inspired nuclear terrorism, let's remember what the real problem was. We learned how to precipitate mass death before we got past the neurological disorder of wishing for it.

Though documentary and not satire, a comic frame comes through naturally without diminishing the grim realities of the topic by juxtaposing the incongruities of logical questions with the answers provided by a variety of people from spiritual traditions that believe in, and hope for, a cataclysmic end to the world.

To avoid such irreversible catastrophe, Burke notes the potential utility of the “humanistic allowances” of his comic frame if we “hope to forestall (if it can be forestalled!) the

most idiotic tragedy conceivable: the willful ultimate poisoning of this lovely planet, in conformity with a mistaken heroics of war...(ATH 1955 Introduction v)” Having suffered from this disorder for a time in my youth, I can attest to its intoxicating lore. I can only wonder if that disorder might have been averted had I responded to fantastical SubGenius pamphlets rather than fundamentalist Jack Chick Tracts.

E) Reflexivity

Simultaneously satirizing such apocalyptic intoxication and aware of the sobering potential of what Burke called “technical devices that would make the rapid obliteration of all human life an easily available possibility,” the Church of the SubGenius Pamphlet #1 screams “The World Ends Tomorrow and YOU MAY DIE!” Below this, in super-fine print, it whispers “Well, no, probably not, but now we have snared your eyes and *you must not throw this baroquely cheesy pamphlet away* before you ask yourself what may be the most important questions of your life.” As Pamphlet #1 exemplifies, the Church of the SubGenius regularly weaves reflexivity into their creations, never taking themselves too seriously while performing their wildly creative satirical critiques.

This reflexivity continues to be modeled by Stang even today as evidenced during our 2010 interview where he reflects on his personal growth during his career as a satirist:

Mark Twain, or somebody, pointed out that there’s satire which makes fun of other people, but a lot of satirists, as they get older, some of ‘em, if they’re lucky to live long enough they become humorists where they’re really more making fun of themselves....You kind of realize your high horse isn’t really higher than anybody else’s and you’ll hit ‘em in a funnier way if you take a more personal

approach and let yourself and your fake religion be the brunt, you know, be the punching bag. And you can do all the punching you want that way and you don't look mean... 'cause we spend a lot of years being mean....I didn't have Slack!

(Stang Interview 25:00-31:04)

As Burke defines the comic frame in *Attitudes Toward History*, here Rev. Stang is the “eternal journeyman” whose satire is a necessary symbolic tinkering as well as an opportunity for reflexive personal growth to maximize consciousness (171).

In a culture that valorizes the serious over the silly and the strictly sequential over the serendipitous, SubGenii fight dogma with dogma emphasizing attitudes and behaviors that are, perhaps surprisingly, healthy and laudable: a playful mindset, improvisational creativity, eagerness for new experience, personal and philosophical flexibility and avoiding a “default” or pre-scripted life. Notably, Finger of Offense #7 says the SubGenii must be willing to fail without damage to their dignity. This is an essential prerequisite for the developing the habit of experimentation, a practice that often becomes “bureaucratized” (to use Burke’s term) thus smothering creative experimentation through fear of failure - or failure to follow protocol. The SubGenius version of the Decalogue reveals some of these values.

the 11 fingers of offense

1. Taking oneself too seriously
2. Taking others’ seriously at all
3. Dishonesty with oneself
4. Lack of style and hygiene
5. Fear in the face of new experiences
6. Failure without dignity or pride
7. Inflexibility
8. Under-developed sense of Humor
9. Default Pessimism
10. Irony as armor

11. Disrespect of self



(SubG History disk 1)

In *Hour of Slack* #1478, Stang provides one of many instances of reflexive self-analysis in a satirical way so it does not interrupt the flow of humor by suddenly shifting the conversation to him. Stang is reading a rant written by “Reverend Roger” and, introducing the rant, admits his own less sanguine SubGenius days.

There’s lots of people who haven’t really quite landed that golden ring of Slack and they’re still as full of hate as I used to be...and one of those is the good Reverend Roger and I’m going to read this....”

‘I gotta say it must be rough living in a universe in which your flawless ideology, whether that be communism or unrestrained capitalism, doesn’t work even though it makes perfect sense to you, and *ought* to work and *would* work if only people weren’t such *sheeple*. But it doesn’t work, does it? And yet here you are trying to explain it to people for the umpteenth time – rinse, repeat.’

Hey wait a minute...is he talkin' about me? I'm the robot programmed to tell you that you're all a bunch of robots! (00:10:30 – 00:10:42)

Even in the midst of reading another SubGenius' rant, Stang maintains that all-important humility that comes from the reflexive perspective built in to Burke's comic frame of acceptance while he reminds us of his own need to resist the efficient, self-assured but unexamined life of the unconscious automaton.

Ironically, the open and ready admission by SubGenii of their incomplete knowledge and their "crackpot" status may actually give them a greater credibility compared to religious and other institutional leaders that feel compelled to claim (if not overtly) to have all the answers. In *Hour of Slack* #1148 "Religion and Rubber Gloves," Stang affirms:

Another important point about this particular religion is unlike most of 'em, and unlike most of our fellow kooks and crackpots we admit that we don't know everything! Can you imagine that? That's not much of a religion, 'cause part of a real religion is you get to feel like you know everything...I can't, I'm not gonna pretend to speak for God 'cause lots of people are already doin' that. (13:08 - 13:51)

More than this, SubGenii encourage a humbling reflexivity regarding the place of our species on a planet floating in nearly empty space. *Revelation X* contains a Lovecraftian acknowledgment of human ignorance of the vast universe as well as our nutritional status in that vastness.

The Elder Gods: Your Agony is Their Endorphin

We are no longer talking about the mere Conspiracy. We are talking about the Great Old Ones, The Elder Gods, the Space Bankers among whom JHVH-1

Himself is but a ‘juvenile delinquent.’ Our language can impart only the feeblest idea of their *incomprehensibility*...

The Elder Gods *don’t have bodies*, and taking into themselves the essence of another creature’s entire emotional pastlife-imprint is the only way they can *feel*. They hardly notice our joy...but our *pain* sends them into paroxysms of mindless pleasure.

Human anguish is a very high-priced drug among the Elder Gods. They will pay top dollar for the right quality of bottled torment, accumulated over a lifetime and pent up in the soul....

Remember, it’s not a physical thing they’re swilling, it’s spiritual essence: the aliveness, the spark, the chi, the atman, the Jiva, the human vitality – the otherwise indestructible part of us. Yet to the Elder Gods, we are nothing more than a snack, a guilty pleasure – the analog of cosmic pork rinds (12).

In this brief meditation on our cosmic ignorance and insignificance skillfully combined with subtle commentary about human anguish, the comic frame is applied reflexively to our entire species as we are compared to a cosmic snack food made of fried pig skin – an analogy that surely promotes a healthy humility in a species that has the technology to destroy itself. This “New Situation” as Burke puts it makes it “all the more imperative that we learn to cherish the mildly charitable ways of the comic discount” if we are to forestall what he calls “the most idiotic tragedy conceivable” – an action that requires us to read between the lines, both soberly and satirically.



1954 Castle Union 6.9 megaton Nuclear Test at Bikini Atoll
(Image: Public Domain)



Chapter 8

Practical Contributions of the Comic Frame & Critic

“Whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once”
(Huizinga 23)

For Burke, the purposes of the comic frame and critic have been sprinkled throughout this essay but a brief review below will lead to a wider discussion to articulate a few specific ways comic frame rhetoric and symbolic tinkering make a positive and useful contribution towards a more charitable, creative and enjoyable public discourse along with some observations about the specific importance of SubGenius enactment of Burke’s comic frame rhetoric.

Though Burke never explicitly states it, use of the comic frame perspective would be a natural inspiration to creativity and intellectual growth, particularly given the abstract thinking required for effective symbolic tinkering, alphabetic, imagic and sonic. Naturally, what constitutes “effective” tinkering depends upon context, audience and intent, just as in traditional alphabetic composition, but the task is made more complex by composing with multiple symbolic media and their separate constellations of connotative meaning applied satirically to an array of sociocultural contexts.

SubGenius participants are encouraged to voluntarily join in the composition of the Church and add to devival performances, create new characters, costumes and concepts for contribution to the evolving mythology of “Bob.” Such freedom and encouragement to join in play with a minimum of restriction and direction is increasingly rare but a necessary context for creative expression, particularly considering the “creativity crisis” examined by William & Mary

Creativity and Innovation researcher Dr. Kyung-Hee Kim in her 2011 study “The Creativity Crisis: The Decrease in Creative Thinking Scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking” published in the *Creativity Research Journal*. Some of Kim’s findings suggest SubGenius creative philosophy and practice might be a positive influence in any attempt to reverse declines in creativity.

Using the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) Figural measurement that involves three 10-minute activities requiring the subject to create images that incorporate shapes already printed on paper, to combine incomplete images to form another image, and to create a set of images from several pages of circles and lines. The TTCT is the most “widely used and psychometrically sound” measurement of creative thinking in corporate and academic realms and more accurately predicts creative achievement than other measures (285-286).

Kim’s discussion of “Implications” concludes: “creative thinking is declining over time among Americans of all ages,” a decline she describes as “steady and persistent from 1990 to the present.” Since this decrease was greatest in the kindergarten to third grade group the study recommends something that is in line with SubGenius practice and would likely be a healthy addition to an adult’s daily routine as well: “Free, uninterrupted time for children should be restored on school and home schedules so children can engage in reflective abstraction.” Kim cites a 2009 study by Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer demonstrating a decrease in the time children have for free play due to “hurried lifestyles” and “over-scheduling structured activities” and strongly recommends “free uninterrupted time...[to] engage in reflective abstraction” (293). Kim outlines some basic steps to “reverse the decline in creative thinking:”

...the United states should reclaim opportunities for its students and teachers to think flexibly, critically, and creatively. Standardization should be resisted. Novel

creative thought and expression should be encouraged, and opportunities should be made available for participation in active, critical discussion (294).

Although delivered satirically and with creative extravagance, the Church of the SubGenius shares the values and practices suggested by Kim. As Huizinga reminds us in *Homo Ludens*, “let it be emphasized again that genuine and spontaneous play can also be profoundly serious” (20).

In addition to authorizing creatively edifying play and inspiring creativity, the satirical productions and gatherings of the SubGenii are important for socially reflexive reasons. One specific benefit of symbolic tinkering is that it can reveal the impact modern media have on our perceptions of reality. For example, at several points in SubGenius history some aspect of their narrative or performance was interpreted by outsiders as subversive or Satanic, resulting in alarm and/or official visits from policing agencies. Such events demonstrate the power of media-enhanced fears, evoked from deep within our brains. This Satanic panic may partly be due to religious “terministic screens” leading to a decreased appreciation of satire or an inability to see humor as a vehicle for truth. As Philo Drummond observes, “that’s always the challenge - not being taken seriously because humor is not seen as a legitimate form of truth telling” (Drummond).

In his essay “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic”, Bergson notes that the comic spirit can “throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination.” Mintz articulates this value more fully in “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation:”

...humor is a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon, that the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns, and that the relatively undervalued genre of standup

comedy (compared with film comedy or humorous literature, for example) is the most interesting of all the manifestations of humor in the popular culture.(71)

More than amusing and beneficial, Minz insists humor is “vitally important” as he outlines the ritualistic roots and rich complexity of comedy, and expands his definition of standup comedy to include “seated storytellers, comic characterizations that employ costume and prop, team acts...dramatic vehicles such as skits, improvisational situations, and film,” all of which are part of SubGenius comic performance. Mintz acknowledges the complexity, ambiguity and paradox present in “the motives and functions” of comedy, suggesting their fertility for academic study. In spite of this potential, aside from studies in anthropology, sociology and theater, “there is no developed study of the social and cultural functions of standup comedy” (76). Is it not sufficiently serious for academia? Is it too playful to count as intellectually valuable?

In his discussion of serio-ludic discourse, Albert Rouzie observes our cultural bias against play and its subsequent corporate commodification:

Play, an element of discursive behavior that comes loaded with negative cultural baggage, is marginalized-associated with children, frivolity, and fantasy.

Consistent with the divorce of work and play in our culture, the leisure industry has achieved expansive success in commodifying play as a retreat from work (“Conversation” 252).

It may be that academics are awakening to the wisdom and power of play and its ability to enhance creativity and learning that Huizinga observed in *Homo Ludens*. David Cratis Williams observes that both Burke and Derrida wrote from beneath the nuclear umbrella and had a mutual interest in liminal spaces and the concept of margins as “both a border of demarcation between

‘opposites’ and a ‘molten’ area of ambiguity wherein transformation occurs between polarities” with a focus on “the functioning of marginality”(“Under” 198). Marginal spaces are, like Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone, often spaces of indeterminacy and freedom, the perfect space for satirical critique and reflection on the restrictions of rigid boundaries. Describing nuclear war as “the eschatology of the rigidification and determination of difference as opposition in conflict” Williams argues that “we pursue blindly that siren song of certitude, and in the process we risk crashing upon the rocks of overdetermination, confirming not our certitude but our finitude”(“Under” 199).

Russia’s recent role in supporting Ukrainian separatists reminds us that the nuclear threat did not disappear with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In addition to missing Russian nuclear materials useful for “dirty bombs”, the Pentagon is developing a new generation of nuclear weaponry according to Aaron Metha’s February 2014 *Defense News* article “Pentagon Completes Nuclear Weapon Upgrade Test.”

Dr. Strangelove I presume?

If nuclear concerns seem overly political for contemporary academic discourse, they were not for Burke. During Burke’s career, from the 1935 Writer’s Conference to his sobering 1955 introduction of the 2nd edition of *Attitudes Toward History* he addresses sociopolitical issues and the application of rhetorical analysis to the world around him. He specifically advances his comic frame rhetoric as a potentially useful tool in the nuclear age.

Though it would be simplistic to suggest that we can laugh nuclear annihilation away, Burke recommends various “frames of acceptance” which he defines as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (5). While SubGenius satire might suggest adopting the

apocalyptic spectator role, Burke's thinking man takes on the role of the engaged jester deploying the comic frame in hopes of averting unnecessary apocalypse. But Burke is not only focused on nuclear doom, he also advocates the deployment of the comic frame for assessment of economic and environmental threats: "The comic analysis of exploitation prompts us to be on the lookout also for those subtler ways in which the private appropriation of the public domain continues" (*ATH* 169).

And once having recognized those "subtler ways" it is only natural to experience what Herbert W. Simons terms "warrantable outrage" for which Burke's comic frame is an apt expression. Simons sees the utility of Burke's approach in "his recognition of the need to channel outrage in a way that might win converts." Reflecting on the psychological steps of the comedic practitioner, Simons charts the course: "proceed *intellectually from righteous indignation, through comedic self-examination, to warrantable outrage*. Correspondingly, it is to move rhetorically from melodrama to high comedy to ideology critique" (*KB Journal*).

The practical value of Burke's comic frame is that it "provides the *charitable* attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness" to avoid being deceived (166). But when we are deceived, Burke calls the comic frame a "*method of study*" where man becomes "the student of himself" developing the ability to "'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated" and thereby gains "*maximum consciousness*" in the acknowledgment of his own foolery (170-171).

However, Burke is clear that this is not just a personal project, but rather a social one of effectively advancing "propagandistic (didactic) strategy." He writes that a "comic frame of reference also opens up a whole new field for social criticism, since the overly *materialistic* coordinates of the polemical-debunking frame have unintentionally blinded us to the full

operation of "alienating" processes" (166-167). Traditional fact-filled academic argument is not going to be sufficient and Burke argues that the comic frame:

as a *method of study* (man as eternal journeyman) is a better personal possession, in this respect, than the somewhat empty accumulation of facts such as people greedily cultivate when attempting to qualify in 'Ask Me Another' questionnaires, where they are invited to admire themselves for knowing the middle name of Robert Louis Stevenson's favorite nephew (if he had one) (170).

This playful, reflexive, always-learning outlook demonstrates that the comic frame perspective "considers human life as a project in 'composition'...translation [and] 'revision,'" like the Trickster, both scofflaw and teacher, fool and wise one, always evolving, never final or fixed.

A year after Burke published *Attitudes*, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published a study of the significance of play titled *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, still consulted as a valuable reference to contemporary game theorists. In his study, Huizinga captures the unexpected nexus of negatively connotative roles and the act of play when he writes "The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings" (12).

Such playful outsiders are recognized as potentially positive for a culture.

In his 2014 book *Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World*, University of Iowa Communications professor Kembreu McLeod discusses the function of the Trickster:

Tricksters tell lies, break rules, party hard, and rip the social fabric – only to nonchalantly stitch it back together in a new pattern. Their very practical,

productive jokes yank the chair out from under society and remake it in the process (67).

Such a description might reasonably be applied to the “carnavalesque” Church of the SubGenius and the playful way they target “the things that society reveres most” with a direct sacredness to profanation ratio: “The more sacred the belief, the more likely it will be profaned” (McLeod 13).

Though Americans have surpassed the Japanese in the number of hours spent at work, few things in America are more sacred than the “Protestant work ethic.” The profanation of that work ethic in the image below is present in the original image as well as the altered one. In the original image from Chaplin’s 1936 film *Modern Times* the worker clocked out for a smoke break and was caught by the panoptic President of the “Electro Steel Corp.” SubGenius revision retains the original purpose to show the Tramp trickster attempting to enjoy a subversive moment of leisure but the face of “Bob” sporting a golden halo over which the word “slack” is visible in a menacing cloud of “frop” smoke. The halo valorizes the assembly line worker’s attempt to gain a brief rest, a gesture of contempt for a system that pretends to but does not actually provide agency and cares only for maximizing profit and minimizing cost – through Scientific Management of course.



SubGenius devivals are packed with scoffing at all seriousness, sobriety and sacred cows, often making creative violation of taboo a part of the performance much as Tricksters regularly violate social norms for educational purposes. Mintz explains the mechanics of such performance violation, articulating its social value:

It might be said, then, that the trickster, con-man, and likeable rogue all turn dishonesty, selfishness, disruptive and aggressive behavior, and licentiousness into virtues, or at least into activity that the audience can applaud, laugh with, and celebrate. The pleasure the audience derives from this sanctioned deviance may be related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural traditions (76).

This description captures the atmosphere of a SubGenius devival with “Bob” as Head Trickster and Rev. Stang & company performing as fellow tricksters with an audience of other SubGenius characters all engaged in improvised satirical play.

The boundary-crossing nature of the Trickster gives him access to that liminal realm between margins where Burke and Derrida share an interest and where our much-desired but sterile fixity of meaning is found to be surprisingly fluid and fantastically fertile. And, like the Trickster, the comic critic/symbolic tinkerer plays in the realms between signs and meanings, appearances and constructions, always hoping to bridge the gap of understanding between opponents with a new perspective born out of laughter.



Chapter 9

Play & Protest: SubGenius Rhetorical Ripples of Resistance

“...we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand. Passing by imperceptible gradations from one form to another, it will be seen to achieve the strangest metamorphoses...For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness...Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination?”

Henri Bergson - “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic” (1900)

As I conclude my brief examination of Burke’s rhetoric in SubGenius performance, two ripples of resistance inspired by the Church of the SubGenius have turned into more public and significant wavelets of protest: Rev. Billy’s Church of Stop Shopping and The Yes Men. I conclude with a glimpse at their work as evidence of the subtle but far-reaching impact of SubGenius enactment of Burke’s comic frame and symbolic tinkering. And, considering Burke’s own playful spirit, his choice of the word “tinkering” may refer to casual play while simultaneously referencing the secondary meaning of tinker – to repair. And the deliberately public symbolic tinkering of Rev. Billy and The Yes Men are meant to generate attention and start dialog as a step towards repairing some of the persistently broken parts of our world.

Bergson’s assertion above that there is some “method” in the “wildest eccentricities” of the comic that might seem counterintuitive to the casual observer of the Church of the SubGenius (CoSG) but his point definitely applies. Not only is the Church of the SubGenius “a living thing” in the sense that any participant can expand upon the elaborate mythology of J.R.

“Bob” Dobbs, an examination of SubGenius rhetoric can illuminate the workings of American “social, collective, and popular imagination” which might prove especially useful in today’s digital maelstrom of symbols, slogans and beliefs.

There is a general underlying SubGenius social philosophy that might be succinctly stated as the valorization of unstructured leisure for playful creation, and the reflexive satire of human hubris. The Church of the SubGenius includes members from both political parties as well as non-voters, though Rev. Stang leans slightly left, most notably in a “Rock Against Reagan” rant in 1984. Stang and the Church of the SubGenius are politically cynical, non-proselytizing, and certainly not activist in any way, unless we interpret their devivals as a kind of Temporary Autonomous Zone that, Hakim Bey suggests, is a form of political action by its very nature, intended or not.

Nevertheless, the unplanned impact of their deployment of comic frame symbolic tinkering can be seen in the political street theater of the Rev. Billy Talen and the Church of Stop Shopping as well as the daring media stunt group known as the Yes Men. Without any activist motive or any significant structure or organization, the Church of the SubGenius’ surprising influence may be due to its unintentional but successful deployment of Burke’s “comic frame” and the playful “symbolic tinkering” it entails. In our current socioeconomic crisis, with historic gaps in wealth combined with racially skewed and excessive policing there is urgent need for an effective non-violent form of protest. Referring to Burke’s comic frame approach, Herbert W. Simons writes in the *KB Review* that it is “a ‘Third Way’ out of the excesses of ‘free market’ capitalism and totalitarian communism might best reconcile the need to give effective expression to moral outrage with the need to contain and channel outrage by way of a self-deconstructive comedic stance” (“Warrantable Outrage”).

Though Stang appeared on the January 31, 1995 episode of the *Jon Stewart Show* to perform a SubGenius watch-smashing ceremony, Stewart was unfamiliar with the church at that time and it is uncertain whether Stephen Colbert knows of the Church of the SubGenius but, as Waisanen writes in the *Southern Communication Journal*, “Stewart and Colbert use the incongruous comic strategies of parodic polyglossia, satirical specificity, and contextual clash to refashion public discourse.....polyglossia [is] the sheer degree of expanded linguistic and vocal capacities that Stewart and Colbert push in their perspectives by incongruity” (122). The same sonic characteristics and incongruities are present in every episode of *Hour of Slack* as well as in SubGenius devivals.

The Colbert Report may not have been directly influenced by the Church of the SubGenius, but Colbert performs the same satirical symbolic tinkering before a cable TV audience of 979,000 and apparently “Bob” wants in on the pie. Beginning with the July 31, 2006 episode when Colbert launched the neologism “wikiality” to describe the kind of shifting consensus reality we have in the digital age. The word took off and a fan of the show launched *Wikiality.com The Truthiness Encyclopedia* on the Wikia online platform. The site originally claimed to be by Stephen Colbert, but now has a disclaimer that also denies posting an entry about the Church of the SubGenius in which visual and potential genetic connections between Colbert and “Bob” are revealed.

Church of the SubGenius

[Edit](#)[Talk](#) 012,320 PAGES ON THIS WIKI

Church of the SubGenius
has its own tube of the internets.
Don't clog it!!!



"Church of the SubGenius"
Is an essential component of
Wikiality.com's Internets Tube for Nerds



The Church of the SubGenius started out in the 1980s as an underground art movement (or "meme") that got way too far out of control. Of course, this is explained by the fact that the Founder and Savior of the Church of the SubGenius, J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, looks a lot like [The Great Stephen Colbert Himself](#). Some SubGenius followers have claimed that "Bob" was a forerunner to Stephen, but this has been questioned by [True Believers](#) in [The Power Of Stephen](#).

**Cults**

- Scientology
- Lutherology
- Bearism
- Wikipedism
- Judaism
- Utah's Marriage Cult
- Moo-slim
- That Pasta-based "Religion"
- **SubGeniism**
- India's Dot "Religion"
- China's Fat-Guy "Religion"
- Voo-doo
- That Goth-chick "Religion"
- Madonna's Jew-ism
- Liberalism



Subgenius




Supergenius

[Add a photo to this gallery](#)

J.R. "Bob" Dobbs and Stephen Colbert -- separated at birth?

[Contents](#) [\[show\]](#)

Additionally, the discussion of the similarities spread on the Web as can be seen in the screen shot below of a Google search of "Stephen Colbert SubGenius" that produced 45,100 results along with images that look like Colbert posing as "Bob" with a pipe. It is quite possible that the Wikiality SubGenius entry was created by a Colbert fan who also happens to be a SubGenius or at least practice SubGenius rhetorical strategy.

Google 

Web Videos News Images Shopping More ▾ Search tools

About 45,100 results (0.22 seconds)


Stephen Colbert, SubGenius or SuperGenius? ✓
laughingsquid.com/stephen-colbert-subgenius-or-supergenius/ ▾
 May 24, 2007 - Hal Robins points out that **Stephen Colbert** has a hilarious article about The Church of the **SubGenius** on Wikiality (The Truthiness ...

Church of the SubGenius - Wikiality, the Truthiness ... ✓
wikiality.wikia.com/Church_of_the_SubGenius ▾
 Of course, this is explained by the fact that the Founder and Savior of the Church of the **SubGenius**, J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, looks a lot like The Great **Stephen Colbert** ...

Stephen Colbert Totally Looks Like Bob Dobbs Sub Genius ... ✓
cheezburger.com/1362757376 ▾
Stephen Colbert Totally Looks Like Bob Dobbs **Sub Genius**. Favorite. Bob Dobbs,politics,**stephen colbert**,the colbert report. By liamdelf. - -. Share: -. Share on ...

Stephen Colbert Totally Looks Like J.R. "Bob" Dobbs ... ✓
cheezburger.com/1379246848 ▾
Stephen Colbert Totally Looks Like J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, founder of the Church of **Subgenius**. Favorite. By Dr_Acula. - -. Share: -. Share on twitter Share on ...

Images for Stephen Colbert SubGenius Report images



[More images for Stephen Colbert SubGenius](#)

While Colbert's notoriety and use of Burke's comic frame has certainly had an impact on public discourse, the pressures of network profit require that his critiques are brief and not too pointed. By contrast, two groups admittedly influenced by the Church of the SubGenius that are also performing Burke's comic symbolic tinkering in strategic, more pointed and articulated ways by staging "image events" designed to gain maximum media attention or go viral in some way. Powerful digital tools and strategic use of Social Networking sites have significantly altered

the balance of power in the world and given ordinary people unprecedented ability to engage effectively in civic discourse and protest. The ability to effectively frame the narrative is tremendously enhanced by digital multimedia composition and the tactical use of humor can be a mighty weapon to unmask or unseat unaccountable power, particularly the “organized persuasion” of media monopolies that encourage acceptance of the status-quo. As Gaëtan Brulotte reveals in “Laughing at Power:”

Today the exercise of power is founded principally on organized persuasion.....Laughter is therefore not *in* power and probably never will be, since it is power’s most feared enemy; but it does *have* power...given the inherent force it seems always to have possessed throughout history, laughter is characterized by its fundamental ambivalence...laughter often expresses a revolt against power or against boundaries in life...and bears within it the seeds of dissidence and subversion, as in carnival (11-12).

As we’ve seen from SubGenius history, laughing at power that is hyper-sensitive to “dissidence and subversion” can invite unwanted attention of various law enforcement officials.

Brulotte’s subversive carnival describes one of the street-level ripples of SubGenius rhetorical practice is the Rev. Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping.

Rev. Billy’s bleached pompadour, white pants and jacket with black shirt and priestly collar, his semi-southern twang, his revival preacher’s cadence and histrionics all suggest a TV evangelist about to inveigh against communists or homosexuals before offering a free miracle prayer cloth, but what the people in JP Morgan’s Manhattan lobby experienced recently was a fiery sermon on sustainability and investment. Bill Talen, known as “Rev. Billy” tinkers with the symbol of TV

revival preacher in a potent and playful form of political protest, partially inspired by the Church of the SubGenius (Talen email).

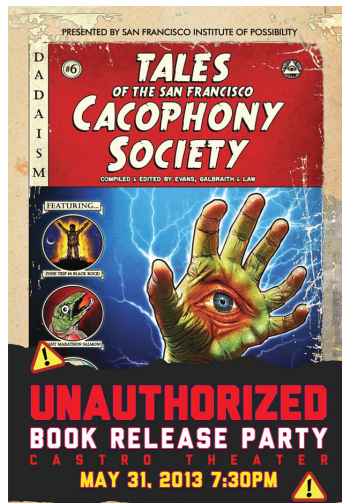
The enduring cultural potency of the Preacher/Evangelist symbol can be seen in continued faith in celebrity preachers and growing congregations in megachurches in spite of the dozens of TV preacher scandals in the 20th Century alone. Further, according to “The Economic Outlook of Very Large Churches” (Leadership Network report) “*Among the churches with attendances of 2,000 or more, 79% grew during 2012...*” and this during a major economic recession.

The power of Rev. Billy’s comic symbolic tinkering became evident in November 2013 when, as John Vidal reports in *The Guardian*, Rev. Billy and eight members of the Church of Stop Shopping were threatened by the New York prosecutor with a year in jail for “riot, trespass, unlawful assembly and disorderly conduct” or what the prosecutor called a “criminal stunt” after JP Morgan complained about their “toad protest” outside the lobby of their Manhattan branch. Participants wore masks resembling the extinct Central American Golden Toad, considered to be an early victim of climate change. Playing music while wearing the toad masks, members of the Church of Stop Shopping swarmed outside the lobby of the bank for 15 minutes, hopping around to protest JP Morgan investment policies that harm the environment. The charges were eventually dropped. Most recently Rev. Billy led a protest march against the IMF and WTO at their fall meetings in Washington DC where the Church of Stop Shopping led a mock funeral for the World Bank and then flew to Ferguson, Missouri in memory of Michael Brown and to ask the police to help bring significant change to the streets but his luggage was seized at the airport because it contained a bullhorn and his evangelist costume suggesting “activist” motives.



Image: Rev. Billy, post-confiscation
email from Rev. Billy

Like Rev. Billy, the members of the Yes Men have acknowledged the influence of the Church of the SubGenius on their work, and as recently as May 31, 2013 The Yes Men spoke at an “Unauthorized Book Release Party” for *Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society* in the Castro Theater hosted by “Sub-Genius Founder Ivan Stang.”



“A call to disorder can be stronger when it can draw upon the cumulative force of order.”
(ATH 33)

Also like Rev. Billy, the work of the Yes Men involves tinkering with symbols of identity and authority. The comic aspect of Yes Men hijinx is more subtle and secondary to their mission

of “identity correction.” In defining what motivates this practice, Yes Men Andy Bichelbaum and Mike Bonanno write “we have found people and institutions doing horrible things at everyone else’s expense, and have assumed their identities in order to offer correctives” (*Yes Men* 11). In *Attitudes Toward History* Kenneth Burke also suggests a corrective approach in his chapter entitled “Comic Correctives” where he recognizes the socially edifying purpose for humor that he specifically contrasts with the common but alienating “polemical-debunking” approach (*ATH* 167). Additionally, as McLeod argues “although ‘good’ pranks sometimes do ridicule their targets, they serve a higher purpose by sowing skepticism and speaking truth to power (or at least cracking jokes that expose fissures in power’s façade.) (3). Burke comments directly on the necessity of such strategic revelations in *Attitudes*, writing “Perhaps we may clarify the significance we attach to the ‘comic’ frame by stating our belief that the comic frame is best suited for making disclosures of this sort, which are necessary to counteract the dangers of ‘mystification,’ so momentous in their tendency to shunt criticism into the wrong channels” (*ATH* 69).

Though they continue to be involved in a variety of actions, presentations and training, two notable stunts of The Yes Men are their 2004 BBC Interview representing Dow Chemical and their 2008 special edition of the *New York Times*. The Dow Chemical spoof was timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of Union Carbide’s 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster, considered one of the worst in history, that killed over 3,800 people immediately, maimed thousands more and led to thousands of premature deaths in the following decades according to a 2005 NIH review by Edward Broughton (“Bhopal”).

To make sure that the public was reminded of Bhopal The Yes Men created a spoof Dow website that, like their later spoof edition of the *New York Times*, reveals a potentially powerful

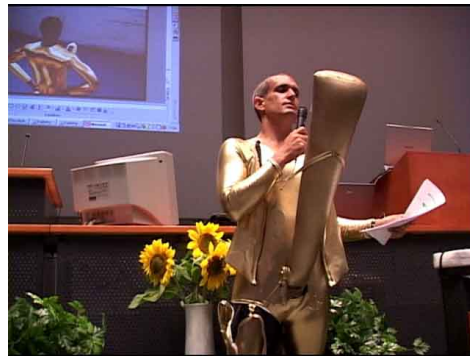
alternative response to corporate attempts to evade responsibility. Posing as fictitious Dow executive “Jude Finisterra” was interviewed by the BBC and his narrative that Dow was taking responsibility by setting aside billions for Bhopal prompted Dow to post its own response, two hours later, flatly denying any such attempt to address the Bhopal disaster. (*Yes Men* website, “Bhopal”)

Their spoof 14-page special edition of the *New York Times* distributed for free on November 12, 2008 but dated July 4, 2009 bore the headline “IRAQ WAR ENDS” which was less a “corrective” action for them than a prompt to imagine a better world. The project involved hundreds of activists, writers and artists working over six months to produce 1.2 million copies of the special issue on six different presses. The copies were then distributed throughout the city by thousands of volunteers. The point? According to Steve Lambert, an organizer and editor of the issue, "We wanted to experience what it would look like, and feel like, to read headlines we really want to read. It's about what's possible, if we think big and act collectively" (*Yes Men* website).



Other *Yes Men* “brandalism” has involved more obvious but far simpler spoofing but their more elaborate and material spoofs align with CoSG practices of self-authorization, identity

creation (complete with back-story), elaborate costuming and performance, best exemplified during The Yes Men's 2001 slide presentation "Globalization of Textile Trade" given by Andy Bichelbaum posing as a fictional WTO executive named "Hank Hardy Unruh" at a conference hosted by Tampere University in Finland. The presentation concluded with the unveiling of a golden "managerial leisure suit" complete with its inflatable, phallic "EVA" or "employee visualization appendage" for viewing and managing remotely located employees.



While it is tempting to dismiss their stunts as elaborate political theater, as discovered in a Wikileaks dump, their impact was sufficient to motivate Dow Chemical to hire the Stratfor private security agency to monitor The Yes Men and other Bhopal activists as reported by Amy Goodman on the February 28, 2012 episode of *Democracy Now*. It may be that comic rhetoric and symbolic tinkering are more powerful tools for political expression and nonviolent change than we usually imagine.

In October of 2014 The Yes Men led an evening of discussion at USC's Roski School of Art and Design where they shared some clips from their 2014 documentary *The Yes Men Are Revolting* and introduced their Activist Switchboard collaboration project. Their documentary will also be screened at the conclusion of the 2014 DOC NYC documentary film festival in New York.

Though the Church of the SubGenius rarely engages in political activism and *never* encourages it, The Yes Men do this and more, even offering propagation materials like their educational guide *The Yes Men Fix The World For Teachers*. The Rev. Billy's Church of Stop Shopping also offers additional training services on their website such as "Retail Intervention Workshops, Parades and Actions, Preaching the 'Fabulous Worship', Lectures, and Revival Services."

By contrast, the Church of the SubGenius offers no direct training though they do offer Ordination and sell church memberships that come with a packet of materials, pamphlets, books, CDs, DVDs, stickers, t-shirts, mugs and even the sold-out cloisonné "Bob" cuff-links, an unlikely piece of jewelry to be worn by a SubGenius, but a clever critique of the cuff-link class and a self-effacing joke in one.



The Church of the SubGenius regularly "proselytizes" in their literature as well as during "devivals." It is a proselytizing that is simultaneously satirical of religious recruitment as well as a serious offer to join in the performance of that satire, to dive in to the ranging and rampant rhetorical pool and make some creative waves. Even should those waves dissipate to ripples, our participatory performance will have edified us and empowered our creativity with the pure joy of playful cultural critique – and for SubGenii that is enough. However, as the performance protests of Rev. Billy and The Yes Men suggest the rhetorical ripples of Burke's comic frame, as

deployed by the Church of the SubGenius, can reach even further than this – perhaps even to Lego Land.

**MakerPeepers.
Emmet, there was a
time, before you were born,
when making new things came as
naturally to everyone as breathing.
The world was messy and
wild, and that made it beautiful.
But then, everything became rigid
and prefabricated, so everyone
just stopped thinking of new
things. Making has been outsourced
to Empura. The Black Falcon has
paved over the world that was.**

Lego: The Piece of Resistance, Miller & Lord.

APPENDIX A

Glossary of Some Common SubGenius Terms

J.R. “Bob” Dobbs: his nickname is *always* in quotes, central figure/face of the CoSG, phone book clip-art image, Super Salesman, “High Ept,” intercessor with the Xist Aliens, Trickster, Slack Master, justifier of sin, generator of good luck

Bulldada: could be anything of sudden significance, ordinary coincidences that give insight or guidance

Conspiracy: “The” Conspiracy of conformity, not to be confused with other conspiracies like the JFK assassination or the Illuminati New World Order.

Devival: a revival in reverse, a spirited several hour gathering for performance of rants, music, sacred rituals and other creative expressions.

Frop: a.k.a. Havafropzipulops: what “Bob” smokes in his pipe, a plant that grows on the droppings of Yetis

JHVVH-1: alien space god and enemy of SubGenii

Shordurpersav: short duration personal savior, could be “Bob,” your best friend, your shirt, your flip-flops, a cigarette butt, your pet or a taco – whatever you choose for the duration you want.

Slack: almost indefinable, different for every person, related to good fortune and leisure for creative play

Pink/Pinks: timid, normality obsessed, creatively challenged, suburban squares

X-Day: the SubGenius “end of the world” involving attack by alien X-ists as well as escape and salvation on “Pleasure Saucers”

Third Nostril: an organ of psychic ability used to discern a variety of information

The Bleeding Head of Arnold Palmer: a strange church ritual reenacted occasionally with elaborate and realistic props

APPENDIX B

VCU IRB # HM15514

(survey granted exemption according to 45 CFR 46.101(b) Category)

SubGenius "Hour of Slack" listener survey - version 1.0

August 15, 2013

This is a brief, voluntary survey of adult (18+) listeners, past or present, of the "Hour of Slack" radio show hosted by Rev. Ivan Stang from the Church of the SubGenius. I am doing graduate research on the rhetorical strategies used on the program and I would like to get an estimate of audience size and response. The survey should take about 5 minutes and all data will be collected anonymously.

I need as many responses as I can get as soon as I can get them, so if you know other listeners, please feel free to forward the link.

NOTE: Participation in this survey affirms that respondent is at least 18 years old and grants the right for potential anonymous citation in my research - citations will not be attached to any name.

Thanks in advance for your participation!

If you have any questions, you can contact me by email:

carletonla@mymail.vcu.edu

Lee Carleton

Grad Student

Media, Art and Text

Virginia Commonwealth University

1. Have you ever listened to the "Hour of Slack" radio show by Rev. Ivan Stang of the Church of the SubGenius?

☐ yes

☐ no

2. Which is your age group?

☐ ☐ 26-35

☐ 36-45

☐ 46-55

☐ 55+

3. In what medium did you listen to the show?

live radio broadcast

- ☐ downloaded audio file
- ☐ streaming audio file
- ☐ SubGenius CD
- ☐ private CD
- ☐ Other (please specify)

4. If you listened to "Hour of Slack" on live radio, what was the station and approximate length of time you listened (i.e. for a few weeks, months, years). If you listened in another format, name it and estimate the length of time you listened.

5. How many of your friends listen to "Hour of Slack?"

- ☐ unknown
- ☐ none
- ☐ one
- ☐ two
- ☐ three
- ☐ four or more

6. How would you describe the frequency of your listening to the "Hour of Slack?"

- ☐ once
- ☐ a few times
- ☐ occasionally
- ☐ regularly
- ☐ always

7. Have you performed on or called in to "Hour of Slack" and did you do so in character?

8. Why do you listen to "Hour of Slack?" or what makes it an appealing show?

- ☐ freeform format
- ☐ specific SubGenius content
- ☐ my acquaintance with the performers
- ☐ the pleasure of the unexpected
- ☐ the pleasure of the familiar

- ☐ humorous content
- ☐ philosophical/political content
- ☐ potential for participation
- ☐ creative characters and performance

Other (please

specify)

9. How would you describe the "Hour of Slack" radio show?

10. Do you find any social, philosophical or political significance in the "Hour of Slack" radio show? Please explain briefly.

APPENDIX C

Radio Stations Broadcasting “Hour of Slack”

OHIO - Cleveland: **WCSB 89.3 FM** – location of live weekly broadcast

The show is also carried on the following stations:

ALASKA – Kasilof: KWMD 90.7 FM ; Anchorage: KWMD 104.5 FM

ARKANSAS - Fayetteville: KXUA 88.3 FM

CALIFORNIA - Santa Cruz: FRSC Free Radio Santa Cruz 101.3 FM

COLORADO - Boulder: KFBR 95.3 FM - a pirate radio station?

CONNECTICUT - Storrs: WHUS 91.7 FM

FLORIDA - Dade City: Dade City Community Radio 87.9 FM (signal?)

GEORGIA - Atlanta: WREK 91.1 FM Georgia Tech (followed by Rev. Suzie)

IDAHO - Moscow: KRFP 92.5 FM

ILLINOIS - Champaign: WEFT 90.1 FM (part of The Mental Vortex)

INDIANA - Richmond: WECI 91.5 FM

MAINE - Portland: WMPG 90.9 FM

MINNESOTA - Minneapolis: Radio Free Twin Cities 93.1 FM ??

N. CAROLINA - Greensboro: WQFS 90.9 FM and Durham: WXDU 88.7 FM Kingsville: Edge

Radio 106.7 FM - not sure this still exists (internet?)

PENNSYLVANIA - Stroudsburg: WFZR 89.1 FM - now an online radio station

TENNESSEE - Sewanee: WUTS 91.3 FM

TEXAS - Austin: KAOS 95.9 FM

WISCONSIN - Madison: WORT 89.9 FM

WISCONSIN - Milwaukee: WICA 92.9 FM - station

possibly no longer exists

CANADA - Halifax: CKDU-FM 88.1 FM; Vancouver, BC; CJSF-FM 90.1 FM and 93.3 cable FM station possibly no longer exists now googling gets you a wiki link to Canadian Campus Radio Stations. That's what we need for America. ;Victoria: CFUV-FM 101.9 FM Shortwave - WBCQ 'The Planet', 7.415 MHz shortwave (also on freq. 9.330, 17.495 and 5.110 MHz)

APPENDIX D

Partial Catalog of SubGenius Neologisms & Slogans

Source codes: P1: Pamphlet 1, P2: Pamphlet 2, BoS: *Book of the SubGenius*,
RX: *Revelation X*, PBob: *Bobliographon*

SubGenius Neologisms

Sadofuturistics P1, BoS	Megaphysics P1, BoS	Scatalography P1, BoS	Schizophrenia-trics P1, BoS
Morealism P1, BoS	Sarcastrophy P1, BoS	Cynisacreligion P1, BoS	Apocolyption-omy P1, BoS
ESPECTORationalism P1, BoS	HypnoPediatrics P1, BoS	Subliminalism P1, BoS	Satyriology P1, BoS
DistoUtopianity P1, BoS	Sardonicology P1, BoS	Fasciestiouism P1, BoS	Ridiculophagy P1, BoS
Miscellastheistic Theology P1, BoS	Sureavolution P1	Rites of Hilariation P1	Divine Emaculation P1
Patriopsychotic Anarchomaterialism P1	Excremeditation P1	Communionication P1	Accultate P1
The Stoogely Arts P1	Stuporstition P1	Abusement Park P1	Nental Life P1
Mediocretrin P1	Assoul P1	Anthropophobiatic P1	Bulldada P1
Bludgeon humor P1	Shordurpersav P1	Pyroflatulation P1	Anarcapitalist P1
Rewardian P1	Prayving P1	Miscelogenizing P1	Devival P1, BoS
Futureligion P1	Indocriliberation RX	Clandestiny RX xviii	

In a discussion of Aristotle’s rhetoric of catharsis, Burke tentatively invents one of his own neologisms: “experimentally, I would propose to make up an English verb, ‘to beyond,’ and thus to translate the Aristotelian formula; ‘through pity and fear *beyonding* the catharsis of such emotions” (*Language* 298). Each of the SubGenius neologisms are a “beyonding” of traditionally fixed meanings that expand conception via hybridizing, a practice that McLuhan called “a technique of creative discovery” (*Understanding* 80).

Key Slogans – on stickers, often shouted at devivals in a call-and-response manner

1. Repent, quit your job and slack off.
2. You'll *pay* to know what you *really* think.
3. Science does not remove the terror of the gods.
4. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.
5. Too much is always better than not enough.
6. Bulldada
7. Give me Slack (or kill me).
8. Pull the wool over your own eyes (and relax in the safety of your own delusions).
9. Act like a dumb shit and they'll treat you as an equal.
10. Eternal Salvation or Triple Your Money Back.

APPENDIX E

Selected transcriptions: 50-minutes with Douglass Saint Clair Smith III

(Rev. Ivan Stang) July 10, 2010 at Starwood Festival XXX in Pomeroy, Ohio

The 'Hour of Slack' started in Dallas in October of 1995...seven broadcast stations...pirate stations, podcasts..

re: the mashup

00:00-05:00

“The first time I saw what we call the media barrage type collage I think was in the movie *Head* with The Monkees. Bob Rafelson directed that and there were these few little bits where suddenly there'd be these strips of dialogue from old movies like Bela Lagosi saying something like “I gave her a powerful narcotic”....and there was a movie called *The Projectionist* that a comedian named Chuck McCann did that was like, it looks like a rise so we're not the first people to do that....”

05:00-10:00

“I really am spending about half of my time trying to make sure that people understand that this really is not a cult that's going to help you...as we say: it won't solve your problems, it might help you to blow 'em off....which often is the main thing you have to do first to get going solving them.”

“One reason I started doing that SubGenius history course was because I wanted to have solid, locked down evidence that, *no* this is not channeled material it's not coming from a supernatural source. It's a bunch of guys gettin' high and just spouting a bunch of crap into a tape recorder, and if something good comes out it then that might make it into print or on the air.

But I've been horrified at the number of people who desperately want to believe that they really are better than everybody else 'cause they're weird and everybody hates them. That means they're weird and better. And it's like, 'no dude, that is the mindset we're *making fun of*'...and the ones that figure that out a little too late....they're the ones that stalk us....years and years of it. There's guys out there on the internet who have been trying to expose me as this Jewish banker industrialist evil guy who parties with Cheney and Bush...and the Grateful Dead, it's all mixed together. All of it's to lead people away from the truth...they never tell you what the truth is.....every week there's somebody explaining to me that I don't understand the Church of the SubGenius and they're gonna show us how to do it right...you never hear from them again.”

would you identify yourself as an artist?

“An’art bum,’ yeah....pretty much. My friend Dr. Hal penned....sort of coined that term ‘art bum.’ I mean, obviously I’ve worked my ass off on this stuff and I actually have made a living at it. If I wasn’t married and we weren’t sharing the mortgage I’d have to live in a crappy little apartment...but since the ‘90’s we’ve been selling enough ordainments and *Arise* copies....we actually had a small staff in the late ‘90’s and early 2000’s. But then that problem with the Bevilacqua happened, the child custody case, and that completely wrecked his attempts to help partner this thing so I kinda had to take it over. But, now that I’m doing all the work I don’t have to take on any extra jobs....”

10:00-15:00

“That was the original concept behind X-Day was ‘let’s do something where we can’t lose’ : they pay the campground to camp, they pay us thirty bucks just ‘cause it’s X-Day and they all get together and meet each other but we don’t promise ‘em anything...and bands would actually pay money to come and play.”

custody case:

“The judge in the case had not been concerned about Church of the SubGenius, he understood it was a joke. I can’t believe it took the biological father this long, but he finally found pictures on the internet that looked pretty questionable. Now the kid was never taken to any of these events, but Jesus and his wife would do all kinds of goofy shit you know, for one thing he’d dress up as Jesus...At one point, I think, he body-painted her and she was nude on stage in front of everybody.....the biological father was an unemployed schizo with a jail history and ‘Jesus’ and ‘Magdaline’ were both college graduates holding down two jobs.”

Membership/sales

“We’ve sold, Simon & Schuster has sold 100,000 copies of our books in general, mostly Book of the SubGenius, roughly. Sub-site has gotten from 8,000 visitors a day all the way up to 27 or 28,000 visitors. I have screen shots and stats of...proof it’s been a pretty busy website for one that doesn’t really...we don’t really advertise, we don’t pay for advertising ‘cause the whole thing is an ad, it’s an ad for itself. And the radio show helps...I let a lot of stations have it pretty much for free and that’s where a lot of our interest comes from, like Atlanta and Connecticut of all places, and around Chicago. And Cleveland, Cleveland has been playing ‘Hour of Slack’ since the late ‘80’s. First it was at the Case Western station and now it’s Cleveland State. [*WCSB* 89.3]

There’s one in North Carolina in Greensboro that runs it....and Madison Wisconsin.

In Madison, even before The Onion was being published, the ‘Hour of Slack’ was there. When the Onion started being published they just started sending those to me for free....and I used to read their articles on the air....”

Political comedy

15:00-20:00

“Well that’s always been around, I mean, Punch & Judy from the old days had political overtones, nursery rhymes have political commentaries...’cause they’d hang ya’ if you said it right out front. There was a group called ‘Ladies Against Women’ in the ‘80’s during the Reagan Administration...we found ourselves running into them a lot. They had a bake sale for the deficit, you know, that kind of thing. They were brave man. In 1984 the Republican National Convention was in Dallas and there was a Yuppies Rock Against Reagan thing, and we were about the only Dallas group besides Brave Combo that would show up. And we’re not overtly....we try actually not to be overtly political ‘cause it’s a comedy thing and it’s a religion thing and politics is like religion...it’s insane. You can’t change somebody’s mind if they’re a hard core liberal or hard core conservative you’re not gonna change ‘em, just like you’re not gonna change somebody’s religion. Personally I’m just a mealy-mouthed, liberal, middle-of-the-road person you know....what is now called a socialist leftard. I consider myself a middle-of-the-road...most of the real socialist leftards, I mean ‘libtards,’ would say I was just an old square....you haven’t been listening to AM radio and reading Yahoo comments.”.....’demoncrat’ is another one...

influences

“Warner Brothers cartoons, and the Three Stooges. And Popeye. And my parents were very sarcastic people – my dad still is...He’s a retired lawyer. He forced us to speak in complete sentences when he was around. You can say something to somebody but what you leave out is the real message, that way you can put all kinds of people down and they never know...everybody else is standing around going ‘oh, I like the way he did that.’ It’s mean, it’s really mean. My dad taught me how to be mean.”

neologisms & collaborative composition

“Of course, Philo Drummond and I put together a whole lot of those in the early days, and people still do. Reverend Onan Canobite has become a real big part of the uh, you might call the permanent stuff. He’ll come up with a gag or a whole paragraph and send it to me...he’s like ‘you might want to use this in a sermon.’

Well after a year my whole sermon is like 90% Onan’s stuff, plus stuff I write. If I hear something good, I’ll whip out...I always have a little brain with me....”

“The thing I did yesterday – I didn’t have it all written up but I spent all day yesterday organizing stuff and making little notes in the book and I had a stack of one-liners and concepts and stuff. And a lot of that came from my friend Onan and others. Like when Lonesome Cowboy Dave and I do live shows on the ‘Hour of Slack’ and Princess Wei...we’ll often come up with stuff right then and there. And when I’m editing it, I make a rough log and occasionally I’ll hear something bubble up in there that none of us remember saying but there it is, and it’s a good line. I think that’s where ‘oilcano’ came from.”

20:24-25:00

“But think how many people are contributing, have been contributing since 1980. We printed that first pamphlet in January 1980 - it’s easy to date – and sent it around to publishers and mostly got rejections. But the first publisher we sent it to was the underground comic books:

Rip-Off Press, Last Gasp, Kitchen Sink and a couple of others. Most of them are gone now. They all looked at it and went ‘why do these kooks send us this stuff?’ and throw it in the trash. But, in every case, the artist, rooting in the trash (probably for food) said ‘whoa, look at this, they hate Jesus more than I do!’ which actually is not the case but....**Paul Mavrides** founded **Rip-Off** and **Jay Kinney** founded **Last Gasp**, they were partners, and they both showed it to their friend Puzzling Evidence who was just a crazy artist. And suddenly there was like these three or four California SubGeniuses who were really....I mean Mavrides is one of the top artists, although he’s not all that well known right now, he’d done tons of great work. And then Hal Robbins of course. Hal got involved a year or two later, but Hal’s a mainstay....You asked when ‘Hour of Slack’ started – it started in ’85, but in 1982 I went to San Francisco to work on the first book with those guys and we crashed a radio show that was on KPFA, a guy named Mobius Rex did. Wellman, Puzzling Evidence, and Mavrides and me all went down there and then we came back the next week. And then I left, went back to Dallas to work on the book but Puzzling Evidence and Mavrides never stopped going back. And they took over that show. And it gradually mutated and Gary Grebogan and he’s a really, really funny guy. So, there was like a whole crew of people doing that show from 1982. And some of them have come and gone.”

“Then Philo Drummond, who left Alice and eventually ended up in San Francisco, so he’s a big part of that show. Pope David Meyer has kind of lost interest, or grew up, or got a life or something...we don’t hear much from him anymore...there’s been a certain amount of turnover. Some people have been solidly in the midst of it the whole run and that would be me, Puzzling Evidence (although he’s pretty sarcastic about it), Dr. Hal, Philo....oh, and Onan Canobite who’s like the youngest. I think of him as this young kid, he’s actually in his forties but he was sixteen when he joined.

motivation & early reprints

“I am an artist and to the extent that uh....what I really am is a monster fan. I was always a monster fan and still a monster fan...the underground comics and Firesign Theater – those things were like science fiction but different. They had that weird, hippy, biting edge to it. You know, normally hippy stuff isn’t very biting but this was hippy stuff but it had this cutting edge to it....honestly there was a long stretch when I thought ‘gosh, if I could be like those underground cartoonist guys, that would just be amazing, or Firesign Theater’...well shit, by the time I was like 28, I was friends with all those guys...they were patten’ us on the back and going ‘oh, I love this “Bob” stuff, can I reprint it?’ You know R. Crumb reprinted our stuff....yeah, his first issue of *Wierdo Magazine*...reprinted the pamphlet in it. Of course that all went to my head and it took me about ten years to get the wind knocked out of my sails again.”

satire & humor & new SubGenii

25:00-31:04

“Mark Twain, or somebody, pointed out that there’s satire which makes fun of other people, but a lot of satirists, as they get older, some of ‘em, if they’re lucky to live long enough they become humorists where they’re really more making fun of themselves....You kind of realize your high horse isn’t really higher than anybody else’s and you’ll hit ‘em in a funnier way if you take a more personal approach and let yourself and your fake religion be the brunt, you know, be the

punching bag. And you can do all the punching you want that way and you don't look mean... 'cause we spend a lot of years being mean... I didn't have Slack! I really didn't have Slack for a long time... but partly because of the move up north and getting married to Princess Wei and living in a decent place and now I do have Slack. And you notice I don't do all that much hating anymore - I have to fake my hate. I have to become a better actor. But luckily there are lots of youngin's coming up... there was some wallpaper-peeling ranting at X-Day... and we got good recordings of it. See, that's my idea of a good X-Day. If you're not gonna get on the saucers at the end of it, at least you can come home with some really kick-ass recordings... and if I recall the content was really wonderful. A new guy named 'Rev. Crazy Jim Jones'... he was great. You'll hear him on 'Hour of Slack'.

eschatology, X-Day & motivation

"On X-Day '98, Conspiracy Year '98 we had to come up with zillions of excuses. The official one is something my son pointed out, that the numbers 1998 form a different number upside down. So, that was part of the fun. And we have a million excuses for why the world didn't end, but the main thing is we're not gonna let any other end-of-the-world nuts out-kook us. We're gonna be there. I've been there at 7:00 in the morning - this is my fifteenth time. The first two we knew were drills but I've actually been there fifteen goddam times waiting for the saucers at Brushwood at seven in the morning. One other person has been there every time Dr. Dark, and **Suzie the Floozie** and **Rev. Motomac** only missed one each, I think...."

"It depends on when the fifth lands... this time it landed on a Monday. Most people have that for a holiday so they hung around. The world didn't end but they hung around and had a big potluck. We took the equipment down but they still partied. People started arriving Wednesday usually and they just kinda get set up. And then Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday we have open mics and kind of a live-radio thing and all kinds of gimmicky content... there's like a costume ball, the theme this year was "The Horror" other themes have been like super heroes and that kind of thing. We have a "Bobby" Award where we hand out these nice little awards for everybody who helped... or fucked up really bad... it's not that the people who get them are "Bobbies" that's the name of the award... like the Oscars. If you get a Bobby Award, then you have "The Bobby." In this case it was little voodoo dolls. Pocus Pantiera made seventy-five voodoo dolls all different and we had to come up with seventy-five award winners... this woman who did those seventy-five things, she just got a degree in theater but she's working as a store clerk at a grocery and a hotel, but yet she does all this great artwork - she should be getting paid for that.

"...that's their Slack. When they're workin' on something that they wanted to do then that's Slack. I'm really luck 'cause I've set up a situation where I can pay myself for what I was probably gonna do anyway. I actually spend a lot of my time doing grunt clerk work... you know like ordering supplies, actually assembling the membership ordainment packs... you'd think we'd have Chinese children doing that but it's all done there in Cleveland Heights. Everything anybody orders, I'm the one that hand-addresses the thing, but I get to keep all the profit such as it is. And there is enough to get by on. I used to scramble to get writing gigs to write for magazines like *Wired* and stuff... but they're hard to get and even when you get 'em they're not

much fun. You do this article and then they edit it to death to the point where well, anybody coulda' done this, why are you even paying me? So, I really kinda let that go.

SubG screenplay

31:05-35:00

"I've spent the last six months, really a couple of years on and off, working on something new which is a SubGenius movie screenplay...and not for an 'art film' but I mean a real Hollywood type movie...the kind of thing that would require a budget 'cause some of it takes place in the future and part of it's period, 1990's. And it's like slightly somewhat based on real stuff but then..."Bob's" in it. Halfway through the movie "Bob" appears and at that point, it changes totally...I've actually written an entire, slightly too-long script. It's like a hundred and forty pages...needs to be a hundred and twenty or less..."

re: writing process

"It's a combination of...occasionally I'll actually just get a wild hare and start whippin' something out, but a lot of it's just assembled from the little one-liners and things. See, I was a business film editor for years and a documentary editor and every project that I've ever done in any medium just about, starts with paper. We get together the best ideas on strips of paper and then start arranging them physically on a big table as to what do you want near the beginning, what do you want to end it with, what goes in the middle and how can you make these things, completely separate subjects lead from one to another. My expertise is faking the transitions from one one-liner to the next...When I started putting this movie together I thought: without the one-liners, those little self-contradictory statements it's just another futuristic chase comedy. In fact that was the critique the first time I tried to do a script like that. So, I thought: it's *gotta* have our one-liners just all through it *as dialog*. So I took the three main books and all the pamphlets and stuff and literally started typing out every good one-liner. I had fifty pages of ten-point text, which is more dialog than would fit in a movie, and cut 'em into strips and then started going...first I said, let's get everything about "Bob" in one section, all the SLACK, all the Conspiracy, UFO stuff, those were the broad categories."

35:00-40:40

"That stage turned into the SubG 101 that I read a little bit of the other night. That was the collection of one-liners that had been organized for subject matter. Then I went through it all, and this really took a long time, this line: does "Bob" have to say this? Could it be said by some idiot? Could it be said by a woman? Would it be different if it was said in anger or if it was said for fun? Or can it just be a toss-off in the background?"

"For every SubGenius project, somewhere in my basement is like a scroll that goes on from here to over there of Scotch-taped together strips of paper. And from that scroll...I'd start typing it up...I found like the original pamphlet layouts, you know, rough, and all that kind of stuff laying around."

“I did an underground movie in college called ‘Let’s Visit the World of the Future’ which was very R. Crumb and Firesign Theater inspired but I had dreamed up my own little alien world and stuff like that...a future chronology. I was gonna write a sci-fi novel or something. Then I started reading science fiction and realized that everything I thought of had been done to death...So I kinda put that away, but I’ve always been interested in interested in clay...stop-motion. That was what got me into the movies in the first place...it was like Harryhausen. That was my last real claymation movie but it worked in a bunch of fake words and things from the earlier future movie. And then when it came time to do the first SubGenius pamphlets we already had the X-ists and their arch-enemies and the supercomputer that would run everything...we had names for all this stuff....And we even made a short movie featuring J.R. “Bob” Dobbs called “‘Bob’s’ Lunch Hour.” We didn’t know “Bob” was a guru of a cult yet...maybe Philo did but he hadn’t told me. If you look on YouTube there’s a silent version of “‘Bob’s Lunch Hour’”.....it stars Philo, it was shot in 1978 and then finished in 2006, so Philo ages thirty or forty years in the course of it. But if you see it, you’ll see that it makes sense. I was so happy when I found the old reel I thought “oh man, why didn’t we ever finish this?” and I went “wait, if we finish it now it’ll be ten times better and everybody’ll think we planned it that way! But that had Philo playing a guy named “Bob” Dobbs and then one day Philo and Dr. X and I were sitting around bemoaning how poor we were and how everything was unfair...we knew about the “pinks” – they were all the assholes. And Philo said something about, ‘well, we’re not geniuses, we’re just sub-geniuses” and that afternoon I suddenly realized what to do with the experience I’ve had as a fanzine editor, all that failed sci-fi stuff I’d started to write, that character J.R. “Bob” Dobbs who was always appearing in old magazines with the pipe and the hammock and stuff...Philo was really the one who said, “look we can use clip-art on this, see look: there’s probably a perfect picture of “Bob” in here” and there was a moment when we both saw that...I still have the original hidden away. But he has another one that’s a ‘virgin’ – it’s from a copy of the same clip-art book which was strictly Yellow Pages, you wouldn’t find it outside of Yellow Pages....So Philo has an un-copied Dobbs head. All Dobbs heads that we see today came from the one in my basement, but the one in Philo’s basement still hasn’t been ‘used.’ Somewhere there’s a photo of him holding the unblemished one...that photo then...it was deflowered right then.”

re: SubG Tarot deck

40:40-45:00

“It hadn’t ever been printed up on paper but this British artist who goes by the name of Imbjr who has illustrated a lot of stuff on the website. He just finally started doing it. It was strictly a vanity project. People active in alt.slack at that time were turned into a card. He’d get a photograph of ‘em and then he’d mess with it you know, turn it into a high contrast, you know like a drawing. That was his expertise....”

Re: SL

“There’s a bunch of SubGeniuses who do that...I’ve got enough on my plate. I stayed away from Facebook, mostly. Well, I got on MySpace just so I could see my niece’s MySpace page. Next thing I knew I had 1500 friends who expected me to read the messages they sent. Suddenly I’ve got my friends’ radio shows I need to listen to, my radio show, my email - which is a lot, the

various SubGenius forums and MySpace. And so, when Facebook came along I just went “No. No, no, no, no.”.....”

personal life

“I’m really, in real life, kind of a square....I actually live more like “Bob” looks. I let “Bob” do all the swinging. I stay out of that soap opera stuff as much as I can. I did go through a divorce in 1999. My poor ex-wife just got tired of the hand-to-mouth stuff plus she got religion...she became kind of New Age. I’m a bad person to live with if you believe in angels...”

re: atheist or agnostic?

45:00-END

“More of an agnostic because uh...I don’t know whose aquarium I’m swimming around in. Maybe nobody’s. But my hobby now is studying microscopic animals. They mostly don’t seem to know about me. They don’t know that I’ve stuck ‘em in a concentration camp...although every now and then, I swear to god, you’ll be lookin’ through that microscope and some little....one of the ones with eyes (some of ‘em don’t have eyes) will turn around and go like this...it’s just the creepiest feeling!....It makes me kinda wanna go “who’s studying me?” My background is secular humanist. My father knows so much about the Bible that he doesn’t believe any of it but he can quote it chapter and verse – a real scholar of the Bible. I studied all kinds of alternative and fringe religions when I was younger ‘cause I wasn’t kind of a believer. There were times when...like I went to an Indian Medicine Man ceremony that convinced me that there was life after death ‘cause I heard ghosts in this dark room. Well later it sunk in, no – I heard the Medicine Man and his assistants creating an environment where people could have faith....miserable wretches on the reservation felt like God was lookin’ over ‘em. So that’s....all power to ‘em, but I *personally* got to the point where I found it easier to...as far as supernatural stuff goes....could be! I seem to be somebody who can’t see UFOs or ghosts but I’m scared of ghosts so that could explain that...I’ve always just found...to tell the truth, if I’d had my ‘druthers right now I’d be reading...I’d be re-learning basic biology. I’d be sitting in my house reading a biology book. I studied anthropology and cave men and dinosaurs and large mammals and reptiles, but that leaves out most of the animals in the world which live inside of all the other animals. So that’s my big kick right now, parasitology....I remember when I was a kid, I got a drop of water out of the gutter and the first thing I saw was an amoeba dividing...I’ve been trying to re-live that moment ever since! I’ve seen every other damn critter havin’ sex, but I still haven’t caught an amoeba in the act yet.”

re: NPR “Worlds of Bacteria, Alive On Your Skin” (05/28/09)

“The mitochondria in all of our cells has its own DNA – it’s *another thing* you know, that lives aboard and allows our cells to work the way they do. I didn’t really understand...nobody understood any of that stuff until the last thirty years or so. And I missed a lot of that and so I’ve been... I quit doing risky behaviors and started studying again. If I could do school over again, I would...back then all I could think about was pussy – which I wasn’t getting! That continued during my first marriage unfortunately. So now I don’t have to worry about any of that, so I’m able to think about lofty things...I’m studying lofty things like the flukes that live inside the antennae of snails and what makes rot smell so bad. I found some new creatures at Brushwood. Their pond was very low and very stagnant - smelled worse than ever. And I went over and got a little sample...there was some nasty lookin’ little thing. I don’t even know what it is. It looked a

tiny shrimp, but most of those are kind of transparent or clean looking. These were filthy looking little things. There've been times...I was looking at [copepods](#), they're very common, you can almost see 'em with the naked eye. And normally, they're kind of pretty: they have this shiny eye in the center and they're kind of transparent, you can see their guts and everything...this one sample was full of copepods that had their own parasites. But first I thought it was a new animal I'd never seen 'cause they were covered with what looked like hair. But it wasn't hair it was other little creatures that looked like a rose on a stem that, every now and then, it twitches and sucks bacteria in. And these poor copepods were *covered with* 'em. I mean, even their antennae had things growin' on 'em – it was just *horrible*, it was *really* horrible. So, when I'm not bashing kooks on alt.slack or reading my friends' funny stuff on the nice SubGenius newsgroup, I'm usually trying to find time to study my little single-celled [organisms].”

APPENDIX F

Transcripts of emails exchanged with Rev. Stang

(my questions are highlighted in yellow, some dates in blue)

From "Rev. Ivan Stang" <stang@subgenius.com>
Subject Re: doctoral research request
Date Mon, **April 23, 2007** 1:24 pm
To "Lee Carleton" <lcarleto@richmond.edu>

A lot of this stuff I am going to answer by simply giving you copies of the pertinent sections of the SubGenius History class I did last year. I'll attach various text documents, as noted below.

First off you might be interested in the ultra-basic stuff I provided them in "1 EXCERPT from SubHistory 1.txt"

>When did you first become interested in art & why - who were your mentors?

>Influential authors or thinkers? Other influences?

See text file "2 INSPIRATORS.txt"

This was actually the LAST installment of the class!

>

>It looks like Church literature evolved from physical cutting and pasting paper images - what role do digital technologies and the web play for the Church today?

Actually the images came AFTER the words. The first pamphlet originally had no art. The clip art was Philo's idea. I got to collaging it some. However, EVERY punkzine also started doing that around that same time (1977-79). By 1983 with the first book we were working with several really skilled cartoonists, and the stuff that looks like collaged clip art is often original art drawn to LOOK that way by Paul mavrides, Hal Robins, John Hagen-Brenner etc.

>
>What is your earliest inkling of "Bob" or the Church?

>
>Is there a specific date of 'official' beginning?

See "3 1978-79 Origins.txt"
also
4 1980 - 1st publications.txt

>
>Where does DEVO fit in?

This is covered in great detail in "5 1981 - DEVO etc.txt"

>Would you consider The Church of the SubGenius to be a multimedia event?
>Happening? Performance?

All those things plus a take-off, a satire, a social club, a real cult, a rip-off, the one true religion etc. etc. -- why not all those things? We don't seem to be ABLE to limit it to a category, which may be one reason it remains fairly obscure.

>
>Is the Church a registered tax-exempt organization?

No, we never even considered that. It's the World's First Industrial Church. If individuals want to pursue that, they can, but the Universal Life Church covered all that ground long before we did. (And you get a free ULC ordainment with your SubG ordainment!)

>What is the estimated membership? (active or total?)

GOOD QUESTION! Right now my mailing list of addresses that I know are good, for \$30 members, is roughly 8,000. The sad thing is that the list of LOST or DEAD ADDRESSES are another 20,000 at LEAST! (And that's just since we started using a computer for the list, in 1990 or so)

>
>Is the figure/role/archetype of the Trickster part of your experience?

When I was 21-22 I lived and worked on the Rosebud Lakota Reservation in S.Dakota and got fairly well steeped in the plains tribes version of that character. Of course I had read about the Sufi version and many other cultural variations as well. I am actually better versed in The Fraud than in The Trickster although sometimes they're the same.

>

>How would you define The Church of the SubGenius for an academic audience or for a dictionary definition, or how might a scholar interpret it?

Sheesh. That's YOUR job. Our definition is in the first pages of BOOK OF THE SUBGENIUS. The Wikipedia article on the Church is generally pretty good. (It does change from month to month though!) They bring up the postmodern aspects. I didn't even know what "postmodern" really meant until a few years ago, myself.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_SubGenius

>

>When & how did you first connect with Starwood?

In 1989 Jeff Rosenbaum invited me to come speak at the 1990 Starwood.

>What do you think is most significant about the Starwood experience and how or why does the Church align with this?

Simple. I had no idea that anybody was still throwing those kinds of parties any more. What's good about Starwood is that it was not started as a pagan thing specifically (more Mondo 2000-ish) but the paganry became a major part just because there are so damn many pagans in this part of the US.

Not so much Starwood but ACE became one of my biggest customers! They threw many devivals in the 1990s and brought me in for almost every Winterstar and Starwood. I met the WCSB radio crew (Lonesome Cowboy Dave esp.) via those trips.

Best of all I met Princess Wei and married her!

I love preaching at ACE events because I'm not preaching to the saved.... and I can make fun of my fave religions DIRECTLY to the FOUNDERS' FACES! (I am now pals with many of the rival cult leaders I made fun of in High Weirdness by Mail.)

Nowadays I'm one of the Starwood organizers so it's a moot point!

>

>Is my 'reading' of the Church as a viral, participatory, multimedia
>critique of consumerism, cultic christianity and cultural homogenization a valid one or did I just
pull that out of my ass?
Is this too obvious to ask?

That's a very good description! As I said though it's also a burlesque show, an underground comic book, and a keg party.

Let me put it this way, I memorized Lenny Bruce at Carnegie Hall. I try not to steal lines from him, or Mark Twain, or Robert Crumb, but hey, it happens. It sure happened to all of THEM!

>Does anyone else ask these questions or make these observations?

>Sure, although often they take the form of
>ACCUSATIONS because many people consider "a
>viral, participatory, multimedia
critique of consumerism, cultic christianity and
cultural homogenization" to be a BAD thing.

>

>PS: I'd also love to hear about, see or purchase the digital materials you mentioned about the Church history.

Ah so. Well, I have included the first and probably most important lessons as text attachments -- you'll see that our BASIC APPROACH is quite "lowbrow" but we just can't keep a certain amount of class from slipping into the delivery mode.

I can provide the complete course materials for

about \$40 but I can't guarantee they'll run perfectly on your PC or whatever. I'm on a Mac but everything I burn(or email) is SUPPOSED to work on PCs or Macs. There's a CDR of just graphics and text (.txt and .html formats) and separate DVDs of 1) mp3s -- many many hours of old SubG tapes) and 2) videos -- all in mpeg1 (the oldest and most common computer video format, works on most DVD players too now) -- again, many hours of stuff that's on our DVDs and much that isn't.

One of the students is doing a much more organized series of DVDs -- the text and the corresponding audio and video (and graphics) are on the same disc and are linked appropriately. (The original course was made with links that work only on the Maybe Logic U. server) But he has only finished the first section, 1978 - 84 or so.

>Rev.

>

>Thanks again for all the fantastic material - I'm really enjoying this and

>feel I could write for quite a while about the Church...

>

>my few quickies:

>

>any estimate on Church membership numbers/demographics and/or participation?

I've been working on the mailing list lately and my most recent educated guestimate is that we've had about 40,000 join up (\$20 to \$30) since the 1980s, of we still know where about 7,000 still live.

>book sales?

I have no idea how the new one and Revelation X reprint are doing, but of the first 4 Simon & Schuster books the combined sales were about 100,000 roughly. Mostly BOOK OF THE SUBGENIUS, which is in its 20th printing.

>

>ever been invited to or tried to get into a traditional art gallery or

>similar elitist venue? would that compromise the Church in some way?

We've done several gallery shows, biggest of which was Psychedelic Solution Gallery in 1991 (NYC) which had over 1000 people at the opening (there's a videop of it on our newest DVD) and the most recent is next week in Amsterdam (did one there in 2004 also)

<http://www.artie.com/cm/art/artists/paulmavrides/bob.htm>

>does an academic study of the Church risk subverting its viral, political

>or critical power? does it mess up the ju-ju or just add to it?

"There's no such thing as no p.r." -- "Bob"

--

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4th Stangian Orthodox MegaFisTemple Lodge of the Wrath of Dobbs Yeti,

Resurrected (Rev. Ivan Stang, prop.)

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PRABOB

November 2, 2011

Yes, thanks, I downloaded the intro and shared the link with scrubgenius forum (though not the main giant SubG facebook pages). Heck I haven't even seen the eBook of Book of the SubGenius because the publishers won't send me a free one! Not that I have a Kindle to read it on anyway.

We almost shut down everything late this last September due to financial crisis and me getting depressed (I got personally backstabbed badly by a whole group of people in the NE) but we were saved by donations pouring in once I admitted we were having trouble and feeling hated!

To make a long story short, car and home repairs and the former Pope Black just about killed us. Black and several of his toadies were unpersoned and blocked from our main forums and everything is okay for now, although I am gonna have to start charging for Hour of Slack downloads.

1. Is it fair to say that radio production is the most consistent or most numerous of CoSG creations?

YES. It is certainly cheaper than printing books.

2. Do you have any count of the total number of shows you've done

Since they've been numbered from the beginning, yes. We started Hour of Slack in Oct. '85 and are now on episode 1,333.

3. Whether your answer is yes or no, can you give me a brief review of your history/interest in audio composition & live radio?

I've been a film maker since I was 10 (even an award-winning one!) and I was a HUGE fan of The Firesign Theatre. I never really thought about radio until Puzzling Evidence and I, and LIES, got invited to a KPFA Berkeley show by Bob Nelson in June 1982. After I went back to Texas, Puzzling, LIES, and Dr. Hal kept coming back and it tuned into a SubG show. I used their tapes on Media Barrages until a community station in Dallas invited me to do a show. So by then I had several years' worth of material to work with. Also back then I allowed many visitors and we had frequent guests on the show.

Bad experiences since then with strangers visiting my house ended the "visiting guest" element.

So basically I stumbled into radio but had the necessary tech knowledge to engineer everything myself, already, and someone to copy, the Firesign Theatre.

4. What is the value of unscripted, spontaneous live broadcast? Have you encountered any unexpected brilliance?

That's what it's all about.

5. Aside from economic survival, what has most motivated your three decades of CoSG creation?

Economic survival without having to work for guys with ties on. I still had to work for fuckwads in ties until around the middle 1990s though. I was a business film editor, then a music video director and documentary writer/editor.

Also, if I were to quit doing SubGenius, I would be a real pussy.

June 1, 2012

Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. Last weekend Wei and I drove to Wisteria/Athens to poster for Starwood and check things out, but our alkternator blew out on the way back -- the Sunday evening Memorial Day -- so it took us a lot longer than expected to get home and catch up.

Here is the link to my survey about "Hour of Slack" - please feel free to critique the questions and/or suggest others.

Would it be worth my while to make a YouTube video to SubGenii to promote the survey? I am very open to your input if you feel so inclined.

I don't think a YouTube video would make as much sense as just posting links to it on the various Facebook and Google Group forums (NOT alt.slack, which has been abandoned to the kooks).

In fact I'll post the link to ScrubGenius (Members Only) and the 3 main FB pages as soon as you give me the word. Or you can do it yourself.

The download info you sent will be very helpful (are there exact, dated numbers?) and if any other audience info comes to mind, I'm eager to get it.

Well, until recently I was terrible about dating the cassette tape originals; they were just numbered. But I've frequently tracked down old show dates going from the annual Xmas Rerun Special, and also from X-Days. For instance XX-Day was in '99, XXX-Day in 2000, 4X-Day in 2001, etc.

I really have no idea what the listener numbers are even for WCSB, where I'm a station member. Most of these are college or indie stations and since they can't run ads, listener numbers aren't much of an issue.

WCSB here in Cleveland is very low power -- hard to pick up in the suburbs. WREK in Atlanta on the other hand has a very powerful signal and probably gets 10 times as many as WCSB dues. But these are just guesses based on wattage.

Princess Wei has been encouraging me to email stations that USED to play the show, and she tracked down current email addresses for station managers from my old list. You might send a form email to them and ask if they have figures.

If/when you have the time, I'd like to hear a bit about the way a typical show is composed - is the freeform program philosophy important for "Hour of Slack?"

Er, well, yes and no. Not sure what you mean. There are two basic TYPES of shows. Once a month or so Wei and I do live broadcasts from the station. ONLY Lonesome Cowboy Dave is

allowed to call in. (Although I have been known to invite others -- and if Dr. Hal is in town for X-day we record as much as possible on both my show and the following one, Synaesthesia.

These live shows have about 15 minutes of collage/music at the beginning, then it's usually totally free-form, which is about all one CAN do with Dave. Sometimes I'll encourage him to think about a specific recent news event or subject, but I kind of try to stay away from current events -- I'm shooting for eternal verities, not this week's news, which will be OLD by the time the other stations run it.

The other 3 shows a month are very carefully edited and orchestrated by me, that is, I carefully arrange them for variety and especially for juxtapositions -- like when one track ends with Philo saying something about a "train" for instance and I remember that one of the new (or old) collages or songs starts with a train sound effect.

However, long chunks of these "canned" shows as I call them come from the other SubG radio shows, especially Puzzling Evidence and Synaesthesia -- which DO take callers. Sometimes Dave and I call Synaesthesia and I record the stream.

This sorta started when I was kicked off KNON in Dallas (me and all the other white people!) in 1994. By then I was a frequent caller to the late Chas Smith's ESO Swamp Radio show on WCSB. Dave was already part of that. Sometimes Hour of Slack was half ESO, especially after I moved to Cleveland -- I'd drive to the station and do half an hour live with Chas and Dave every Thursday. When Chas died I had to start going in and running my own show on Sundays myself.

And Puzzling Evidence started in 1982 --! -- so there was always that show to pull great clips from. Those shows are VERY demanding to edit, though -- the freeform thing often backfires and becomes incomprehensible. I only use the parts where I can actually HEAR what's being said, which is not usually the whole show.

do you regularly use an outline/notes/script?

Not often. If there's a subject I want to address I might make rough notes or even type up a script. Or, I sometimes read things I posted for fun to one of the text forums... or stuff by others.

Back in the late 1980s and early 90s I was much more politically outspoken -- typical of youth, who think they know everything -- and I did write acres of rant-scripts for those. Those rants crop up in reruns now and then. I usually do everything off the top of my head now. The only thing I actually write up carefully for recording is my annual Starwood (and any other devivals) rant. But even those are added-to and changed up until the very last minute.

Basically, over the years I became less confident in my politics but much more confident in my improv.

Also... keep in mind that after doing 1,362 episodes, since 1985 -- it gets OLD. I still put a whole day or two into any non-rerun show, but I was more INTERESTED then. There are certain

technical routines -- the dubbing, copying, uploading, linking etc. -- that get REALLY tiresome after enough decades of it!

if so, how often does the show depart from this?

If I go to an event or on a trip that produces a lot of new recordings -- like our recent Winter trips to Texas and California, and state parks in between -- that will get used for a long stretch of shows. Last January and February while in SF I did 3 Puz Ev show, 2 (2-hour) Ask Dr. Hal shows with Philo and Hal, and called in to Synaesthesia twice. Also Wei and I decided to make daily on-the-road travel reports. So all of that material is STILL being used even though we got home in March. The hiking/driving reports by Wei and I are VERY heavily edited, btw, because we tend to ramble and sometimes forget that the recorder is even on!

Every X-Day, Hal and I (and whoever else like Papa Joe Mama or Rev. Susie, or Legume, or Pisces) record as much as we can -- both at the station on the Sundays bracketing the event and live on the cafe stage, shooting for 2 hours a day. That stuff, and the rants and band recordings, gradually gets chopped up and strewn across a dozen shows following X-Day. I usually get two shows' worth out of Starwood as well, mostly from my prepared rant.

I MUCH prefer actual sermonizing at Starwood and other non-SubG events. In a devival, everyone's heard it all before, it seems like (even if it's new!) and the audience frequently is louder than I am.

I DO consider the audience at all times. I try very very hard to make each show sound clear and move quickly. Some shows obviously work better than others. Sometimes I'm more cramped for time than others. I turn to reruns when we're on the long road trips and during the festivals.

how often do you have callers or call-in shows?

Me, almost never. Dave doesn't exactly count as a "caller"; the only reason he isn't at the studio with us is because his car is too fucked up to get him from Ashtabula to Cleveland like he used to do every week.

I took calls for the first 30 shows at WCSB. What I learned was that half of each show would be lame because half the callers are lame. I prefer to let Puz Ev, the old ESO show and Synaesthesia take the calls, then I run only the good parts.

I really want these shows to hold up over the years. I have been amazed at the Firesign Theatre live shows that have been unearthed lately -- they do stayed off current events and much of their early 1970s stuff sounds like it might as well have been recorded yesterday.

On the other hand, we're not trying to be big-time "ready for prime-time." We are very happy to

have a small but devoted audience that actually appreciates the multiple layers and the word-play.

Hell I myself can barely understand what Dave is doing until I get home and hear the recording. What seemed like nonsense while at the station (and dealing with engineering, which I have to do all myself (as does Puzzling, and Susie) is revealed to be really brilliant on second listening in the calm of my home studio.

In the old days I played a lot more "Conspiracy" music -- that is, bands signed to labels who were fairly famous, like DEVO and Oingo Boingo. But, I can't really legally SELL those shows. And, more than that, life is short. Anybody can buy Zappa or Beefheart at a store. I try as much as possible to stick with original material that has hardly been heard anywhere else... new or old "undiscovered" bands, the ones still struggling. The Rudy Schwartz Project for instance, if you ask me that's as good as Zappa, and I would rather give exposure to the new (or obscure) than kiss the ass of somebody who's not only already famous, but DEAD.

So most of the music I play -- with the exception of background music, from old monster movies -- is stuff that was emailed or mailed directly to me by the bands. And I don't use all I get by any means. Some of it like The Flyin' Ryan Brothers is actually too "GOOD" or rather normal-sounding for the show. (I do use their stuff in my little YouTube videos though.)

Sometimes a SubGenius will send me a link to some weird 12-tone European band or whatnot. Rev. Tater has made some GREAT finds along those lines.

I don't track pop culture much. I stopped listening to the radio when my kids learned to drive, and Wei and I deliberately DON'T have cable TV. Every now and then I play something that to ME is obscure, only to later discover that I just played a chunk of fucking Britney Spears or some such. I wouldn't know her from Lady Gaga from Madonna. I don't even know what U2 sounds like except in what Negativland cut them up into.

So, in that respect we are very insular, and very much by choice.

Wei and I watch one TV show at a time, usually from downloads. For instance, last year it was every Twilight Zone from 1959 to 1965. This year we watched DEADWOOD finally (which I went apeshit over). We're finishing up the 3rd season of Breaking Bad now.

My friend Rev. Nickie Deathchick watches a lot of TV but has excellent taste and tells us what shows me MUST not miss. We did watch all of LOST avidly, as ridiculous as it often was; in fact that was part of the charm.

But, just as an example, I've never seen a single X-FILES episode. I was raising kids and having a life when that show was on.

I am a HUGE fan of Matt Groening's shows FUTURAMA and THE SIMPSONS -- leastwise, the old Simpsons. Haven't seen a new one in years. I love Southpark too but usually see those a year after they first air.

We watch a lot of movies though, from old silents to brand new ones. I often note the time of a particularly great bit of dialog and then later copy it for the show. I'm about halfway through copping great Deadwood soliloquies.

Talk about "fuck-cutting" for the broadcast version! -- 'cause see, the Internet version is one thing. The CDs I send to stations -- which they pay for in most cases, but only \$5/show still -- I have to remove cussing from those. Often, you can't tell. Other times there's a BLEEP sound.

Rev. Susie and I both boast that we can visually spot the words "FUCK" and "SHIT" in wave forms. That's not ACTUALLY literally true, but CLOSE. We can see them if we're looking in the general vicinity on a given file.

This should keep you busy for a while! Sure kept me off the street today. (Wei on the other hand has spent the day putting Starwood flyers all over the hipster parts of Cleveland. She is really the BACKBONE of that festival in many respects now, partly due to attrition... old organizers dying off or failing to adapt, new ones being illiterate and incompetent too often.)

Be sure in your work to give due credit to Susie's show and the Puzzling Evidence one! -- and some youngsters called Ministry of Slack have been a big help lately too. In fact you ought to contact Philo, Dr. Hal, Puzzling Evidence and the Flooze to get some input from them. The Puz Ev show technically predates HoSlack although I was there in SF for their first two shows. (It was originally Bob Nelson's show, but Nelson gradually moved on and Wellman gradually took over.)

BTW a guy doing a dissertation about televangelist SATIRES interviewed me last month and sent me the transcript. BOY do I sound dumb when my speech is transcribed directly and not polished up! AIEEEE!

I hope if you quote me from that time you interviewed me, let me see it first, or do me a favor and remove the stutters and duhs and uhs and "you-knows"!

More STANG email correspondence....

Would it be accurate to claim that much of SubG literature was originally spawned on radio?

No. SOME was. The BASIC stuff -- Pamphlet 1 and Book of the SubGenius -- were done even before **the Puzzling Evidence show** started on KPFA-Berkeley in June 1982. In fact that started BECAUSE I was in SF to work on the book with Mavrides, Wellman etc. HOUR OF SLACK started in Oct. '85.

Much of the **material in Revelation X came from audio tapes** I made with Philo, G. Gordon Gordon and others specifically talking about that book. SOME stuff from the radio shows

definitely ended up in that book but not most. Usually it was the other way around. **I would read stuff being generated for the book on the show.**

The most recent book, the majority of that was first posted by me or others on the Internet, in the open forum we then used, alt.slack. We had to move it to a moderated Google Groups forum, ScrubGenius. That would be the best place to ask others about source material.

Once I do a show I don't usually listen to it more than the one time required to clean up cussing and mistakes.

It's hard to pick a fave 10 shows, but #984, a "best of" from old media barrage tapes, was put on CD. (see also 1996 # 534 rerun as #1264)

The list of radio stations is on subgenius.com if you push the RADIO button at the top. It is somewhat out of date; not all those stations still play it, and some that do play it -- albeit mostly small pirate ones -- are not listed.

1/21/2014

Hey Rev,

I'll be meeting with the guild soon so I should have some definite answer about a devival at VCU by February - I hope your April is still open.

Unfortunately I cannot say April is open. Our winter trip got cut short by numerous events and we may well be either still helping Wei's Mom move or we'll have finished and gone on the road. So for now I can't safely put anything on a schedule until maybe June.

Do you know any SubGenii in Richmond? I'd like to get the word out and make connections if we get the OK to bring you in.

I used to know a few, including Rebbly Sharp and the GWAR guys, but it's been a long time. I don't give out addresses unless people WANT them given out, which hardly ever happens anymore through ME -- but that's because of all the SubG social network things like the various Facebook pages, the Scxrubgenius forum and the IRC chats. That's where to ask around and see who is brave enough to meet local Subs.

Last question: (and you know that's a LIE!)

Aside from yourself, who are the others you would say have been major participants/co-creators/collaborators/composers with you over the decades?

I think one is Philo Drummond - is that his SubG or real name? Is he the guy usually on-air with you?

Princess Wei of course - what is her real name?

(my wife Clary was impressed by her delivery of Rev. Chocolate Velvet's rant)

Wow... you definitely need to take the SubG online history course if we ever offer it again! You have some mixed up notions.

Philo and I developed Pamphlet #1 during 1978 and 1979. It was reviewed in Heavy Metal and other underground comics and during that phase (1981) collaborators got drawn in from many places, notably Paul Mavrides, Jay Kinney, Doug Wellman, Hal Robins, Gary G'Broagfran in SF; in Little Rock, Doktors 4 "Bob" including Pope Sternodox; Byron Werner in L.A.; Pope David Meyer in NYC; even Susie the Floozie.

BOOK OF THE SUBGENIUS miraculously got a publishing deal in 1983 and came out. Sunk, but got republished in '87 by Simon & Schuster, then we did the other books. (None of which were big sellers, BoSG is the only one REALLY still in print.)

But The Puzzling Evidence Show, first SubG radio show, started in 1982. Hour of Slack started in 1985 but Philo had moved to St. Louis and started The Swinging Love Coirpses. Philo later moved to SF and joined the Puzzling Evidence show, which he, Doug and Hal all do every week still, after 35 some-odd years...

In the 1990s I was invited to Starwood Festival and then got involved in the Cleveland area mutans, including Chas SMith's ESO Swamp Radio on WCSB (which had already been carrying HoSlack for years) and I did a lot of shows with Chas and Lonesome Cowboy Dave. Chas died in 2006 and Dave has been my main spouting buddy with Wei since then, although when we're in CA we do Ask Dr. Hal shows and Puzzling Evidence shows.

Dr. Legume came on board about 1991 and has been a huge influence especially on live events like X-Day. I met Princess Wei about that time but I was married to someone else (literally, Rev. Someone Else) until she divorced me in 1999. That's when I left Texas and rebooted in Cleveland. Wei and I got married in 2001.

The three main books show the main names, although several from the early days dropped out or were ejected: Buck Naked and Janor Hypercleats being prime examples. Bad aspects of their personal lives (i.e. them being assholes) caused me to stop working with them.

There have been hundreds of SubGenius collaborators and contributors -- my main job is as "ringleader" or M.C. of this enormous disorganized circus.

Thanks SO much for bringing "Bob" into the world....

No, you have it backwards! What it really is, is Philo and me thanking "Bob" for letting us be the first ones to stumble upon THAT FACE.

Bottom line, the original basics of the Church came from me and Philo, not just me. In fact Philo is the one who suggested using clip art. He contributed more Slack than I did, one could say. What I did was the actual labor that has kept this crazy machine running.

02/23/2014 email

re: college speaking tour

Actually, we tried really hard to get on the college lecture circuit in 1995. Jesus and I went to two different conventions where schools shop for speakers and acts and stuff. We didn't get ONE BITE! -- and that was even after we resorted to having Magdalin prance around in a bikini. The ONLY point of reference those college kids undersood was literally this: "Do you like wild humor, like Saturday Night Live?" That was the ONLY line that seemed to get their attention at all.

We met a guy called The Amish Comic at those conventions -- he didn't get any business either!

Re: SubG lit & comics for VCU collection

The only "literature" we have on sale on SubSITE are Book of the SubG, Rev-X and the two pamphlets. There was never another comic from Rip Off Press although they wanted to do one -- mavrides didn't. But we did far more than what is still in print and on sale. 3 other books and a dozen Stark Fist mags. "Bob's" Favorite Comics is VERY rare. Oh and of course there was the Steve Jackson game. And the dozens of CDs and DVDs and the OLD tapes, which aren't sold anymore. THREE FISTED TALES of "BOB" is on subgenius.com in HTML -- the whole book.

BUT, all of that stuff is on the SubG History DVDs!

There are very few copies left of any of the old Stark Fists -- I hate to let go of them. Some, there are basically no copies left.

However when I scanned all the thousands of pages I did them very high res, so that one could reprint the zines from those files. The ones I'm sending are reduced down for viewing on a computer, not for printing from (huge difference in file size).

APPENDIX G

Permissions

Greta Lindquist <glindquist@ucpress.edu>

July 7, 2014

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Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Best wishes with your project.

Sincerely,

Greta



Rev. Ivan Stang <stang@subgenius.com>
May 30.2014

You are welcome to use any of the SubGenius images you want for the purpose of your dissertation! Best of luck with it!

mike bonanno <mike@theyesmen.org>

of course! permission granted!

On May 30, 2014, at 3:07 PM, carletonla@mymail.vcu.edu wrote:

Lee Carleton sent a message using the contact form at <http://theyesmen.org/contact>.

Hello!

I've contacted you previously from my personal email (leecarleton@gmail.com) regarding the Church of the SubGenius and it's impact on the Yes Men. As I complete my dissertation, I would like to include at least one image from your documentary (a shot of the executive suit in full bloom) in my work. Will you grant me permission to use the image? Is there a fee for student use?

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BEING BODIES THAT LEARN LANGUAGE
THEREBY BECOMING WORDLINGS
HUMANS ARE THE
SYMBOL-MAKING, SYMBOL-USING, SYMBOL-MISUSING ANIMAL
INVENTOR OF THE NEGATIVE
SEPARATED FROM OUR NATURAL CONDITION
BY INSTRUMENTS OF OUR OWN MAKING
GOADED BY THE SPIRIT OF HIERARCHY
ACQUIRING FOREKNOWLEDGE OF DEATH
AND ROTTEN WITH PERFECTION

FROM WITHIN OR
FROM OUT OF
THE VAST EXPANSES OF THE
INFINITE WORDLESS UNIVERSE
WE WORDY HUMAN BODIES HAVE CARVED
MANY OVERLAPPING UNIVERSES OF DISCOURSE
WHICH ADD UP TO A
PLURIVERSE OF DISCOURSES
LOCAL DIALECTS OF DIALECTIC

Kenneth Burke



The TriPrimality:

“Bob” is.
“Bob” becomes.
“Bob” is not.
Nothing is; Nothing becomes;
Nothing is not.
Thus: Nothing Is Everything.
Therefore: Everything is “Bob.”
Abracadabra.